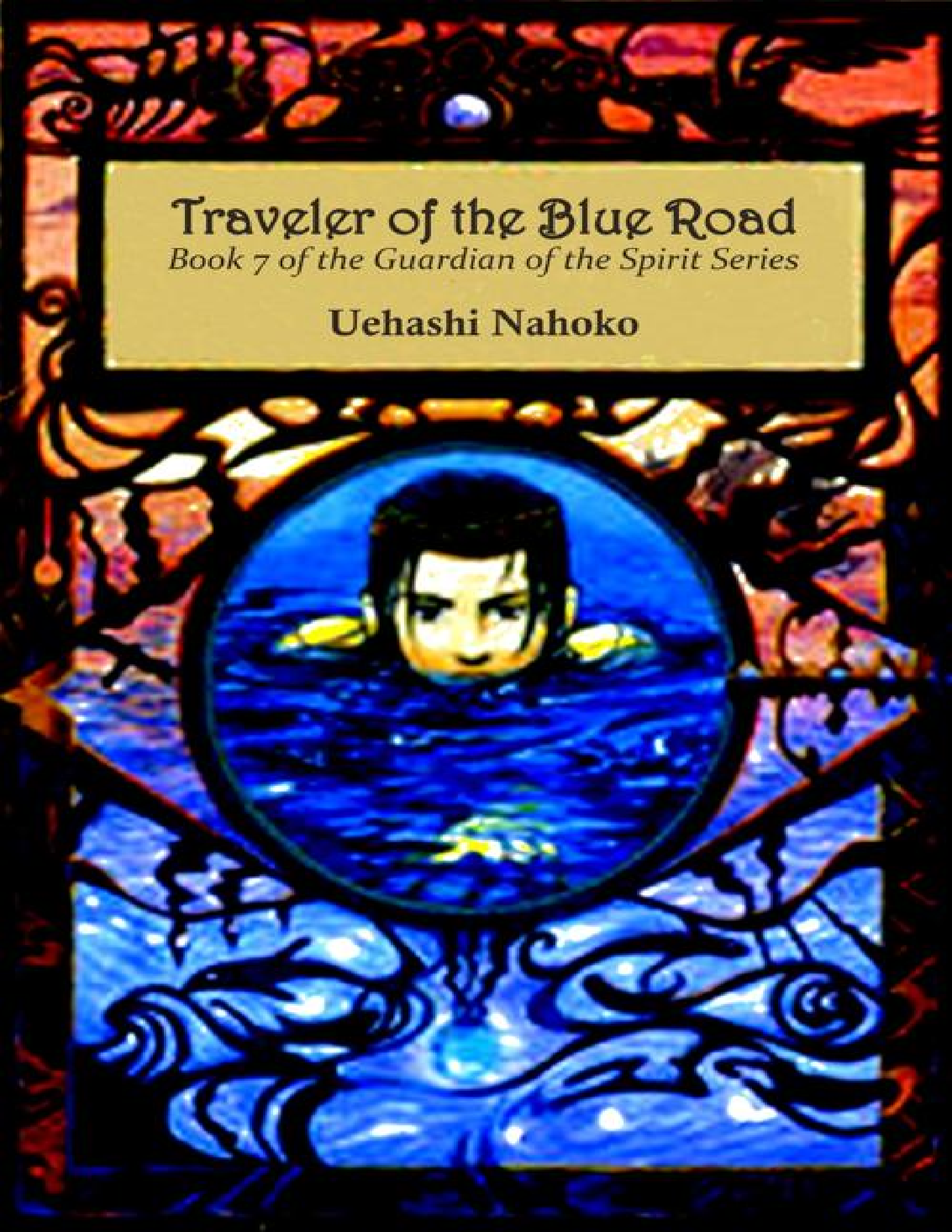
Traveler of the Blue Road

Book 7 of the Guardian of the Spirit Series

Uehashi Nahoko



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(Book 7 of the Guardian of the Spirit series)

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Prologue: Waves from the South

The sky was a solid sheet of dark gray clouds. A ship's sail flapped in the strong wind as rain pelted the deck. This ship originally came from Sangal. Sailors and people carrying luggage and cargo climbed on board from the harbor's wharf, complaining about the sudden downpour. The cargo handlers hurried to secure the ship's supplies belowdecks.

This part of the harbor was reserved for ships of medium size. A teenage girl, Senna, jumped off the ship in a single bound and landed on the wharf. She wore a Sangal-style raincoat called an oro that protected her head and body from the lashing rain. Shirtless sailors on deck coiled up rope from the rigging and moored the ship to the dock. None of them seemed to pay much heed to the weather.

"If you're done working, go ahead and drink," one of the sailors called out to Senna. "We'll join you later. We may have to leave in a hurry, so try not to drink too much, yeah?"

"I won't!" Senna called back. She ran lightly up the wharf into the harbor city of Choron.

Choron was New Yogo's largest harbor, so it was constantly busy, even more so since Sangal declared war on the Talsh empire. New Yogo's exports to Sangal had markedly increased overnight. Many ships also came from Sangal to Choron to resupply. It was much easier and faster to ship necessities like food and medicine by sea than over land.

Cargo ships unloaded their wares onto carts, most of which were headed to Kosenkyo, New Yogo's capital city. All of the packhorse and wagon drivers lined up along the edge of the harbor that was closest to the local bars and taverns.

One of these taverns, Yuro's, was Senna's destination. Yuro's was one of the larger taverns in the area; a large wooden sign secured with loose metal fittings hung over the door. The wind and rain battered the sign violently against the door as Senna approached.

In one corner of the tavern, a group of men was setting up a target board to show off their accuracy with throwing knives.

"Hey! Hey, you guys—don't do that. Stop it! You'll hurt someone!" One of the drunk men attempted to break up the proposed knife-throwing contest, but no one listened to him.

A man stood opposite the target board and aimed carefully with the tip of his knife. He threw clumsily; the blade embedded itself in a wooden support beam next to the target.

More knives went flying toward the target board. Two of the knives ricocheted against one another in midair; one of them whizzed through the air at great speed toward a man sitting near the tavern's entrance.

The man appeared to be deep in thought. His eyes flicked up and locked on the throwing knife headed his way. He drew his dagger and deflected the tip of the flying knife with his own blade. He caught the hilt of the knife with his free hand.

People sitting near him openly expressed awe and admiration. The men who had set up the target board approached him and bowed their heads in apology.

The man who had deflected the throwing knife with his own blade was named Hugo Arayutan. He was around twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old, though he appeared somewhat older. He wore his long black hair gathered in a simple knot behind his head. His expression was serious and intense.

Hugo did nothing but sit and stare at the men in front of him, but his aura was intimidating enough to compel them to silence. The sound of the rain pattering against the roof was clearly audible in the sudden stillness. Everyone seemed to get just a little more sober when they looked at him. The man whose knife had almost hit Hugo shook so violently that his teeth chattered.

Hugo stared at the drunk men for a little longer, then lost interest in making them squirm. He placed the throwing knife down on the table next to him with a dull thud and resumed drinking.

The tavern's other customers returned to their seats and resumed their conversations. No one threw any more knives.

Senna entered Yuro’s tavern and took a deep breath. She smelled cheap liquor, sweat, smoke from a fire, and the faint salt tang of the sea. The customers she saw weren’t only from New Yogo; she saw many Rotan and Sangalese people here as well. The people around her talked to one another in a hodge-podge of different dialects and languages.

Senna hung her sodden oro raincoat on a nail and wiped water off her face. When the men in the bar noticed that she was a woman, they turned their attention on her with keen interest. She was young, only fifteen or sixteen years old, with tan skin and a tall, lithe build that made her appear Sangalese. Her large black eyes sparkled as she searched the room for Hugo.

"There he is," she muttered. She waved. When the men observing her noticed who she’d come to meet, they stopped staring. None of them wanted trouble.

Senna sat across from Hugo at the same table. She ordered a drink, paid the server and said, "Strange to see you in this place at this time of year. Don’t you usually spend the summer here instead?" She rubbed her hands together; the rain had made her cold. The coat she’d bought in Sangal wasn’t warm enough for this kind of weather.

"Safe journey, I take it?" Hugo asked.

She looked at him with an expression of disdain. "Do you even have to ask? Anyway, the other ships are coming in behind us. We’re the first to arrive."

Hugo nodded. "So you’re supposed to wait here?"

"Yep."

A server came by to refill Senna’s glass. Senna grinned and downed her glass of wine in a single gulp. The alcohol warmed her up after her trek through the rain.

Senna focused her eyes on Hugo and said, "So...do you have it?"

Hugo pulled a scrap of paper from a pouch on his belt and passed it to her.

Senna frowned as she accepted the paper, but grinned when she noticed the Talsh seal embossed on it. That paper granted Senna

diplomatic immunity while traveling; she'd finally earned it after years of service to the Talsh empire. "Seems so. Thanks."

Senna's shoulders relaxed. She squirmed a little and twisted in her seat to look down at a little white mouse poking its head above her collar. The mouse twitched its pink nose and scanned the room with beady black eyes.

Senna fed the mouse a bit of food from Hugo's plate. "You must have been so cold! I'm sorry," she said. "My clothes are all wet."

The mouse gobbled up the food in her hand and skittered into her coat pocket.

Lightning touched down nearby. The thunder that followed the lightning strike shook all four walls of Yuro's tavern. Many of the bar's customers lifted their right hands toward the sky as a gesture of respect toward Ten no Kami, the God of the Heavens. Lightning was said to be the wrath of the god. Most warriors of New Yogo paid reverence to Ten no Kami during thunderstorms; no one wanted to get burned to a crisp.

Hugo suddenly smiled.

"What's so funny?" Senna asked.

He shook his head. "Nothing. It's just...we do the same thing in Yogo."

Hugo was from Yogo, which was on the southern continent—an ocean away from New Yogo. Yogo had been conquered by the Talsh twenty years before and was no longer its own independent kingdom.

Hundreds of years before, the Master Star Reader Kainan Nanai of Yogo had crossed the Yaltash ocean that separated the northern and southern continents to found a new nation. The people of New Yogo had intermingled with the Yakoo, the land's indigenous people, over the course of many generations. The languages of Yogo and New Yogo were also quite different, though they were still mutually intelligible.

Royalty, nobility and the families of New Yogo's most renowned warriors were usually not of mixed race, but almost every farmer, fisherman, or common laborer was at least part Yakoo. The general attitude and conduct of New Yogo's people was also entirely different from Yogo's people. The two nations had existed in complete isolation for over two hundred years; they didn't even engage in trade.

The fact that people still paid reverence to Ten no Kami in the same way here as they did in Yogo was a bit surprising to Hugo. It reminded him of home.

Some of the men in the tavern brought their heads together and started speaking in hushed whispers. They were clearly sharing rumors and secrets. Hugo tilted his head a little and listened.

All of the rumors were strange. One man talked about a valley in the Misty Blue Mountains being covered in blooming wildflowers even in the middle of last year's winter. Shioro fish had laid their eggs out of season, so the Blue Bow River had overflowed with fish as well as water at the beginning of spring. The spring rainy season that year had been much longer than normal. Most of these rumors came from people who lived on or near the Nayoro peninsula.

Hugo listened to the rumors for a while. Silence fell; the atmosphere of the room became somewhat apprehensive.

A man cajoled several others: "Hey now, what's there to be scared of? Even if there's strange stuff going on, the Mikado will protect us from anything dangerous. He's descended from the God of the Heavens. Our land is protected by that god, and others too. Who cares if it rains a little too much in a year, or if flowers bloom in winter? Is any of that actually important? If we've ever threatened by anything that could actually hurt us, I'm sure Crown Prince Chagum would intervene, just like he did when he saved the land from drought."

The eyes of the people in the bar fixed, hawklike, on the man who had spoken. Only Senna, who was still focused on reading her letter of diplomatic immunity, paid no heed to him at all.

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Hugo mingled with the other men in Yuro's tavern, drinking and listening to news. He was the personal spy of the Talsh empire's Second Prince, Raul. His official title was Taku, which meant "hawk."

The Talsh empire had gradually swallowed up all the other nations on the southern continent. Each conquest had added to the empire's

wealth and power. Now that the Talsh empire's focus had shifted to the northern continent, Hugo had been ordered to learn everything he could of New Yogo's princes. He was to infiltrate New Yogo and recommend an invasion strategy based on what he learned. The Emperor of the Talsh empire wanted to capture the oldest prince and use him to orchestrate New Yogo's downfall, so abducting Crown Prince Chagum was his first priority.

Prince Raul was still young, but he had an extraordinary gift for understanding and exploiting the talents and weaknesses of other people. He was also an ingenious tactician and strategist. He chose people from Sangal, Rota and Yogo to be his eyes and ears on the northern continent. Soon, all of his plans would be complete. The nations of the northern continent would be caught in the net that Prince Raul cast over them.

Prince Raul didn't have a large number of spies at his disposal, but all of them were hand-selected by him personally. Very few of his spies were warriors; he preferred to use the poor, the aged, and women and children for much of his spy network. The only thing that all these people had in common was their intelligence. Thanks to them, Prince Raul could take a broad view of the world stage, which only improved his plans and strategies. He was constantly receiving and reacting to the news that his spies brought in.

The northern continent would soon be under attack. The nation of Sangal was finally beginning to fall under the Talsh empire's influence after years of resistance. When Sangal fell, Rota and New Yogo would be completely open to attack from the south.

The King of Sangal had recently sent a message to New Yogo's Mikado; that messenger would reach Kosenkyo soon, but the King's message had nothing to do with Prince Raul's plan. He only wanted to find out how New Yogo's Imperial Court would react to Princess Saluna's secret message.

Hugo had employed Senna to intercept this message and carry it here. Senna had her own ship and was the leader of a group of pirates. She was called the soul of her ship, Tsuara Kashina, because she'd been born under auspicious circumstances.

After acquiring Princess Saluna's message, she'd taken her small ship and sailed through uncharted waters and secret routes to reach New Yogo, stopping at small islands on the way to rest, resupply, and send messages to Hugo. When her ship got close to shore, she'd sent a discreet sailor to deliver the message directly to Crown Prince Chagum; then she'd docked her ship at Choron. And now she was here, meeting Hugo at Yuro's tavern.

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The thunderstorm outside suddenly ceased. Hugo removed his pipe from his pocket along with a fine powder that he packed into it with two fingers. He lit the powder with a candle on the table. Sweet-smelling smoke drifted into the air around him. The burning herb was called choru. He smoked in silence for a short while, then looked up at Senna.

"What do you plan to do now?" he asked.

Senna flinched and looked down. "Whatever I can, I guess," she said. Senna's home was south of Sangal in the Sugal Sea. When the Talsh first invaded Sangal, the Sagan Islands in the southern Sugal Sea were the first to be subjugated. Senna hated the Talsh empire, but she hated Sangal just as much for sacrificing her home and her people to save their own skins.

Even before the Talsh invasion, Sangal never treated the Sagan Islands much better than a throwing stone: Sangal had always wanted them to maintain their distance. Both Sangal and Talsh strictly forbade piracy, which interfered with Senna's livelihood. The people who lived on the Sagan Islands were either descended from pirates or pirates themselves. They'd been forced to change their way of life overnight when the Talsh took over.

Some of the richer pirates made a successful career shift into shipping and trade. Others acquired licenses to open shops where the Talsh empire stopped to resupply. Pirates with less money and

influence weren't able to afford licenses, so they had little choice but to keep being pirates in secret.

Senna owned her own ship, but she was far too poor to afford a trading license. She'd been as careful as she knew how, but it was no surprise when the Talsh caught her.

Senna sighed in relief as she looked down at her letter of diplomatic immunity.

"Talsh is always hungry for news," she said. "I could gather it for them. I'm sure they'd pay well. I can't work on land for long...hm. Maybe I should try fishing? But then I'd need a fishing license. Why does everything cost so much money?"

Hugo listened to her complaints in silence, then said, "Consider your options. What could you do that would give you the most freedom?"

Senna glanced sidelong at Hugo, trying to figure out if his question was serious.

"Probably trade," she muttered.

Hugo nodded. "I know you're not sure what you want to do yet, but if you bought a trading license, you could make enough money to expand into fishing or other industries, right?"

Senna's eyes shone. "Well...yeah. I guess I could."

"Then let's talk about getting you enough money for a trading license," Hugo said. "I have work for you, if you want it. I can't tell you all the details now, but it'll probably be dangerous. If you do it, you'll own your ship outright again and make a lot of money on top of that. You'll also get to work with your own crew."

Senna's eyebrows went up in surprise. "That's awfully generous. But I imagine I won't be working with *only* my crew. Who else is involved?" Her expression became serious. "The usual, I take it?"

Hugo smiled.

Senna looked troubled. "What are you going to do when they get here?"

"I'm still not sure," Hugo said quietly. "It's my job to find things out and figure out how to use information. I can't decide what to do until I have all the facts."

There was a low sound like an animal groaning coming from outside the tavern. Was that the sea? Or distant thunder?

The bell in the harbor rang, signaling nightfall. The bell served to guide the last remaining boats into port for the night, so it rang for a long time. As soon as it stopped ringing, Hugo stood up from his seat.

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Rain washed the evening sky clear and cloudless. Countless stars glittered in the gathering darkness as the messenger carrying Princess Saluna's secret message set foot on Nayoro peninsula. The message he carried would change the fate of Crown Prince Chagum—and the entire northern continent.

Part 1: The Mikado and
the Crown Prince

Chapter 1 - The Future Holy Sage

It was just past sunrise. Candle flames flickered in their holders on the upper floor of Toya and Saya's store in Kosenkyo. Shuga and Torogai sat across from one another in the dim light of the candles. One of Torogai's knees was pulled up in front of her.

Torogai leaned forward slightly to pour herself a cup of wine. "You look tired, Star Reader," she said.

Shuga smiled tightly. "You always seem full of energy, Master Torogai."

Torogai laughed, making her look about ten years younger. She was rumored to be the greatest magic weaver of the age. Shuga guessed that she must be past seventy-five now, but she hadn't changed at all in the years he'd known her.

"It's not because I'm your master, or a magic weaver," she said. "I've just gotten good at hiding my troubles. That's the secret to a long life."

Shuga nodded, still smiling. He was only twenty-four years old, but he was in charge of Crown Prince Chagum's education. He also continued to serve the Holy Sage at the Star Palace, so his workload was always heavy.

Torogai sighed. "What are you worried about now? I've been hearing rumors and seeing disturbances in Nayugu, but..."

Shuga nodded. "Strange signs and omens have appeared in the Star Palace as well. Whatever is going to happen will likely happen soon."
Torogai snorted. "Don't be so sure. The time scale of Nayugu is vastly different from ours. You're being impatient. There's no need to jump to conclusions. Most of the signs you've noticed are probably because the season is changing in Nayugu."

"The season is changing?"

Torogai nodded. "Nayugu has seasons much like ours. It seems that the snow melted unusually early in Rota this year."

Shuga nodded. He'd heard the same thing at the imperial palace.

"So the strange weather events this year, like the flowers blooming in the mountains over winter, are because it's spring in Nayugu now?" Shuga asked.

Torogai shrugged and poured more wine into her cup. "There are places where Nayugu and Sagu are connected. The place where the flowers bloomed in the mountains is probably a place like that."

Torogai tasted a bit of the wine in her cup, then gulped it all down. She seemed utterly content and at peace as she drank.

"The Yakoo believe that Nayugu's spring is long—as long as a hundred years in Sagu," Torogai said. She glanced up at Shuga and grinned. "So you see why I think you're being impatient."

Shuga grimaced. "Well, I can't really help it. I can't ignore disturbances in Nayugu any better than I can ignore disturbances at the imperial palace." Shuga appeared genuinely worried. "I'm most concerned about Crown Prince Chagum."

"Why? What's wrong with the boy?"

Shuga opened his mouth, then closed it. He smiled reflexively. Torogai hadn't referred to Chagum with such easy casualness in a long time. Chagum wasn't the Crown Prince of New Yogo to Torogai; he was more like a member of her own family. Shuga couldn't stop referring to him by his title; neglecting to use it inside the imperial palace would get him in a lot of trouble. But he did forget—sometimes, very briefly—that Chagum was the Crown Prince.

"Physically he's fine," Shuga said. "But there are rumors among the common people that Crown Prince Chagum is the savior of the country, not the Mikado. I can't help but worry at the effect these rumors are having."

Torogai nodded in slow understanding. "I see. The Mikado is jealous of Chagum, is he? That's not good news."

Shuga nodded. "I'm also worried about the future of the country. We've received threats from the Talsh empire. I'm worried that the Mikado might twist the people's admiration for Chagum to force him into a foolish confrontation with the Talsh."

Torogai didn't fully understand the political implications of what Shuga had said, but it seemed to her that Chagum was being threatened with assassination by his father. Again. New Yogo had to fortify itself against the Talsh empire. Using Chagum for that pretext provided opportunities for getting rid of him. The Mikado had never needed much of a reason to threaten his son's life. He'd shunned him since Chagum had returned to the palace after the incident with the water spirit.

Chagum knew full well that his father had ordered him killed. That knowledge had been a thorn between them for years. Time may have smoothed over the rougher edges of their relationship, but neither Chagum nor the Mikado ever forgot how their estrangement came to be. But Chagum was essentially good-hearted, so he'd never hated his father. He was also unusually clever and possessed a unique strength of spirit.

He'd just turned fifteen at the start of the new year. At his adulthood ceremony, several young retainers and warriors came out to pay their respects to the future Mikado. Seeing this strong show of support for Chagum had angered the Mikado and his fanatical supporters, who viewed the Mikado as a god. The Mikado was not skilled at winning the hearts of his people; for the first time, this lack in himself caused deep personal dissatisfaction.

Shuga understood how the Mikado felt. He and Chagum were completely different. Chagum was already shifting the balance of power inside the palace; people that clung to the status quo were threatened by Chagum's growing popularity and influence.

If the Talsh empire attacked New Yogo now, the nation would be vulnerable due to the power split between Chagum and the Mikado. Chagum's supporters believed that he could save New Yogo from the Talsh, which was a further blow to the Mikado's pride.

"If the Second Prince hadn't been born..." Shuga trailed off.

"I guess the Mikado's supporters think of the second son as his true heir now." Torogai stroked her chin thoughtfully. "They don't have to worry about the succession if Chagum dies."

Torogai was as blunt as ever. The Second Prince, Tugum, was three years old. Most children who lived to that age survived to adulthood. Chagum's half-sister by the Third Queen was ten years old; her future husband had already been selected.

It certainly seems like the Second Prince is being set up to inherit his father's position. Is there any way to weaken his claim?

Even thinking about such things made Shuga feel heartless and bitter. The Third Queen's father, Army Grand General Radou, was a very

strong supporter of the Mikado. He doted on his grandson Tugum, but treated Chagum with indifference at best.

"Is there anyone in the palace who can protect Chagum?" Torogai asked.

"There's the Navy Grand Admiral Tosa, his grandfather. He's disciplined and level-headed, which suits his role and helps him stay above the political noise at court. He's never supported Crown Prince Chagum openly, but he often speaks of his concerns regarding the next Mikado's safety inside the palace."

"Sounds like the boy has at least one decent ally, then," Torogai said. Shuga was still frowning, so she added, "Is there something else I should know about Tosa that you haven't said?"

"Well... He's popular. A lot of people support him, so..."

Torogai nodded. "If he can gather supporters to his side, then Chagum's supporters would increase, too. Which would make the Mikado even angrier."

She spoke of the Mikado and Chagum as if they were ordinary people, not bothering with their honorary titles or a respectful tone. Shuga understood that this was because she was a magic weaver and unacquainted with the etiquette of the imperial palace, but he still frowned.

Torogai leaned forward and peered at him with interest. She was smiling, but Shuga didn't smile back. The factions forming in the palace now could become violent with just the slightest push on either side. The entire court's eyes were on Chagum, regardless of whose faction they supported. The atmosphere in the imperial palace was extremely tense.

He's still so young. Chagum was both intelligent and perceptive; he understood that the threats to his life were very real. He couldn't possibly save himself from every potential assassin.

Torogai extended her leg and kicked Shuga to shake him out of his melancholy mood. "Don't make that face," she said. "You're supposed to be cunning and crafty, Shuga. If you're really that worried, think of some way to protect him."

Shuga smiled stiffly. He was in a bit of a precarious position himself. The Holy Sage was getting on in years, so he'd recently taken on three apprentices—including Shuga. One of the apprentices would take over for the Holy Sage after his death. Gakai had also been chosen as an apprentice; he was fully loyal to the Mikado and the Second Prince. He'd been openly hostile toward Shuga for a long time, and now they were literally in opposing camps. Gakai lacked many of the Holy Sage's gifts, however, and he was also fairly easy to manipulate. Shuga wasn't sure how much of a threat Gakai posed, but he was definitely an adversary.

The third apprentice chosen was Ozuru, who had recently turned fifty. The Holy Sage had consulted him on difficult interpretive tasks in the past; they'd also performed research together as students. Ozuru was smart, but ruthlessly logical and stubborn; neither Gakai nor Shuga considered him a true rival.

Shuga never wanted to be the next Holy Sage. The role was too severe and rigid to suit him. There was no way to refuse his selection as an apprentice; the Holy Sage had made that clear almost immediately.

"You are the youngest of all the candidates," the Holy Sage had said upon his selection. "You are unshakably loyal to Crown Prince Chagum. The current Mikado scarcely knows that you exist. That is a problem that you will have to solve, Shuga. The Holy Sage guides the Mikado, and the Mikado guides our nation. If the Crown Prince does not become the next Mikado, you know who is next in line."

The Holy Sage had as good as told him to reject Chagum and switch sides to the Mikado's faction. It was true that Shuga's current position was wholly dependent on Chagum; it was also true that if Shuga acted too strongly in support of him, the Mikado might notice and punish him somehow. But Shuga couldn't bring himself to abandon Crown Prince Chagum, whose father hated him so much. Most of his familial bonds had been strained or severed by that hatred.

Shuga nodded at Torogai, who was still staring at him. "You're right. I can't show any sign of weakness, and I can't lose here. I'll do my best."

Shuga appeared determined, but he was still frowning. Torogai felt a deep sense of unease. Something was seriously wrong.

Torogai and Shuga finished their wine and descended the steps to the first floor. Toya waved to them and brought over a tea tray.

"It smells wonderful, Master Torogai!" Toya said brightly. "Are you sure it's all right for us to drink whatever's left over?" he asked as he poured the tea.

Torogai laughed and nodded. She took a slow sip of her tea.

Toya poured tea for Shuga, then retrieved a wrapped package from one of the store's shelves. "Mr. Shuga, three people stopped by and left these messages for you," he said.

"Oh—thank you, Toya," Shuga said. He accepted the package and passed Toya a few coins as payment. Toya knelt down and bowed his head to express his thanks.

"Thank you, Mr. Shuga and Master Torogai! You honor us with your continued patronage."

Shuga finished his tea quickly, said his farewells and left the store. Toya grinned down at the coins in his hand.

"Toya," Torogai said, "I see you're helping Mr. Shuga. Are you being careful?"
"Huh? What do you mean? All I do is take messages."

Torogai frowned. Shuga was worried about the Talsh empire invading New Yogo. It didn't seem like that invasion could be stopped. Torogai knew that the messages that had just arrived came from southern merchants who had collected news from the Talsh empire; Shuga had told her as much. It seemed he wanted to understand the Talsh better in order to prepare a strategy.

Torogai was concerned that he was having his messages sent to this store. She didn't want any negative rumors to spread about the place. Shuga had told her about spies of the Talsh empire walking among them in disguise. If those spies learned of this store, they might attack it —or, more insidiously, use it to spread false information.

"Are you sure about this, Toya? It could be dangerous."

"Thanks for your concern, Master Torogai, but we'll be fine. I'd rather keep gathering information; that way I know what's going on. I'd do it even if I knew for sure that it would get me into trouble. Saya's

pregnant, so we need the money that Mr. Shuga and his friends bring in."

Torogai shook her head sadly. Toya had come a long way from living under a bridge in the lower city. It was clear that he never wanted to live like that again.

"Well... All I can do is tell you to be careful. If you sense danger, run. It's better for you and Saya to run and lose everything than stay here and be killed."

Toya nodded and gave her a confident smile.

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When Shuga left Toya's store, it was still half-dark and drizzling; the road back to the palace was difficult to make out. He walked briskly toward the palace in the rain.

Shuga pictured Crown Prince Chagum in his mind's eye, talking to him on the Hill of the Full Moon in Sangal. "Forgive me, Shuga. I'm dangerous, so I might destroy you one day without meaning to. I might try to drag you down with me. If you ever feel that happening, I want you to let go. I don't want you to hate or resent me, and I don't want you to die. Live. Find some other way to help the country."

Shuga's face contorted in pain. *I can't do that. I have to see terrible situations like that coming and prevent them from happening. I can't let go.*

Shuga stared down at the ground and stalked down the empty street in the darkness.

Chapter 2 - Letter from the Sangal Kingdom

Chagum looked up at the sky, thoroughly enjoying the first sunny day of the season. He was at the imperial family's villa in the mountains, where standards for propriety were a bit more lax than they were in

Kosenkyo's imperial palace. His servants and retainers had left him alone to enjoy the day, for which he was extremely grateful.

Despite the relative freedom that the mountain villa afforded him, Chagum still wasn't allowed to wander around wherever he pleased. In the absence of his retainers, he was expected to remain in the courtyard's garden.

Chagum pushed his freedom to its limit by climbing up onto the huge boulders of the courtyard's rock garden. He jumped onto the largest boulder and sat down. From this height, he could see over the walls that surrounded the garden. The lake just outside the mountain villa was clearly visible. This place had been Chagum's favorite ever since he was a little boy.

Most of the rocks in the garden were covered in a layer of fine moss because of the recent heavy rains. The ground was still sodden, but Chagum's high seat on the boulder was warm and comfortable. He watched the reflection of the snow-covered mountains in the surface of the lake. A few birds flew over and dipped their wings in the water.

Watching the lake always made Chagum contemplative, almost meditative. That lake contained the Palace of the Flower, which called out to people in their dreams and enticed them to enter. He remembered the sadness of the First Queen who had fled into her dreams to escape her grief.

Chagum's mother, the Second Queen, loved the mountain villa just as much as he did. She said it eased her heart to be there. Whenever he visited his family at the imperial palace, the Third Queen would only speak in short, noncommittal words and phrases. She spoke ill of Chagum to Tugum and the rest of his family, sometimes to his face. The Second Queen tried to shield Chagum from the brunt of this abuse. She wasn't the kind of woman to speak ill of anyone, so staying at the imperial palace for too long was intolerable for her.

Who needs the imperial palace, anyway?

Chagum let out a loud, wordless yell like a challenge. If there was anyone here who was spreading nasty rumors about him, he'd deal with them personally—with his sword, if necessary.

Common people could learn a trade, create tools and art, and buy and sell their wares. They didn't have to fight or argue with other merchants to be successful if they didn't want to. It would be nice if government and politics worked the same way. Why did people pick sides, vie for power, and put down their opponents? It seemed so arbitrary. Why even pick sides and make enemies in the first place?

His mother had gotten much thinner and more withdrawn over the last year. She was obviously ill. She lived in constant fear that her only son could be assassinated at any time.

I wish I could give up being the Crown Prince and just be the Second Prince again.

He was sure that he'd feel a lot better if he could renounce his title, but that was impossible. The Mikado was descended from a god. Making a second son the Mikado while the eldest son still lived would be completely contrary to tradition. In New Yogo, such an idea would be deemed ugata kaimu—fighting against the current of established policy. If he even proposed such a thing, he'd be refused immediately.

Going against tradition ran the risk of changing the ultimate fate of the nation. Chagum would be the next Mikado unless he died of an illness or an accident. His fine eyebrows drew together in a frown. He brought his balled fists down on the moss-covered boulder to vent some of his frustration.

When Chagum heard faint footsteps behind him, he placed a hand on the hilt of his dagger and turned around. He saw someone wearing red clothes walking through the trees at the edge of the garden. His eyebrows shot up in surprise. He moved his hand away from his dagger and shifted in his seat to greet his visitor.

A young girl in richly embroidered clothes the color of a sunrise emerged from the trees and waved at him energetically. "Hi, Chagum!"

"Mishuna, did you run away again?" Chagum asked.

Mishuna was the daughter of the Third Queen. She looked up at Chagum, scrunched up her face and laughed.

Such a laugh would be considered scandalously undignified by her mother and attendants. Chagum's own reputation would only worsen if he encouraged her, but he couldn't help but laugh when he saw her like this. He remembered how hard she'd laughed after losing her two front teeth. Her attendants had begged her to keep her mouth closed, but that had only made her laugh harder.

Typical sibling relationships were uncommon in the imperial family. Chagum and Mishuna should probably be enemies since they had different mothers, but Chagum felt nothing but affection for her. Mishuna often slipped away from her attendants so that they could meet.

"Be careful, now. Your attendants will scold you if you get your dress dirty."

Mishuna nodded and lifted her skirts to prevent them from dragging on the wet ground. "Can you see the lake from up there?" she asked.

"I can. Do you want to come up and see?" Chagum jumped down from the boulder and boosted her up. "There. Can you see it?"

"Yeah!" she said in a lively tone. She smiled down at Chagum.

The Third Queen's procession must have just arrived. They definitely hadn't been here yesterday. Chagum guessed that Mishuna had dashed away to see him at the earliest opportunity.

"Why did you run away? I don't want you getting into trouble."

Mishuna leaned toward him and whispered, "Prince Tugum threw a huge fit when we got here, so I used the distraction to make my escape." Mishuna always used the three-year-old Tugum's official title when she spoke of him. Her mother had doubtless instructed her to do so. "And I knew you'd be here, so I wanted to visit."

Chagum smiled tightly. Her attendants were probably looking for her. She had to know she wouldn't get much time alone after running off. Chagum was happy that she'd decided to spend this sliver of unsupervised time with him.

"Chagum," Mishuna said in a slightly more serious tone. She seemed like a sweet and simple-minded girl; most people underestimated how intelligent she was. "I think you should go back to the imperial palace. Now."

"Huh? Why?" Chagum asked with genuine surprise.

"A messenger from Sangal arrived at the palace yesterday. That's why mom and I came here, to tell you about the messenger. I overheard my grandfather and uncle talking. They seemed glad that you were gone when the message came. They—they were laughing."

Chagum forced his expression blank. The messenger had probably come for him specifically. He'd received several such messages since his adulthood ceremony. Most of the time, personal messengers required a quick response. Since Chagum was currently absent from the imperial palace, the Mikado might accept the message and act in his stead.

"Thanks, Mishuna," he said. He picked her up and hugged her. Her clothes were heavily perfumed with shala bark. He always associated the smell with her. She was still so small, and so kind. She should be able to play in the garden's wildflowers and not worry about messing up her clothes.

Chagum said goodbye to Mishuna and hurried to his mother's rooms inside the mountain villa. The Second Queen was embroidering something in her lap when he entered. She looked up at him and smiled warmly.

"Did something happen?" the Second Queen asked softly.

Chagum told his mother about the message that had arrived at the imperial palace. The corners of her lips twitched downward. "I see. I tire of all the bickering and competition at court. Try not to get too angry with anyone. I worry about—retaliation."

"You worry too much." Chagum sighed inwardly at his mother's concern. "But I take your point. I need to leave right away. Please feel free to stay here and rest as long as you like, mother."

Before he left, Chagum leaned in close to her and whispered, "I'll be fine. I promise."

She smiled weakly at him.

Chagum strapped the sword he'd been given at his adulthood ceremony to his belt, nodded to his mother, and left.

The Second Queen noticed that Chagum was taller than the Mikado now. Still she could see a little bit of the boy left in him as he walked away. It was hard for her to accept that Chagum was so grown up.

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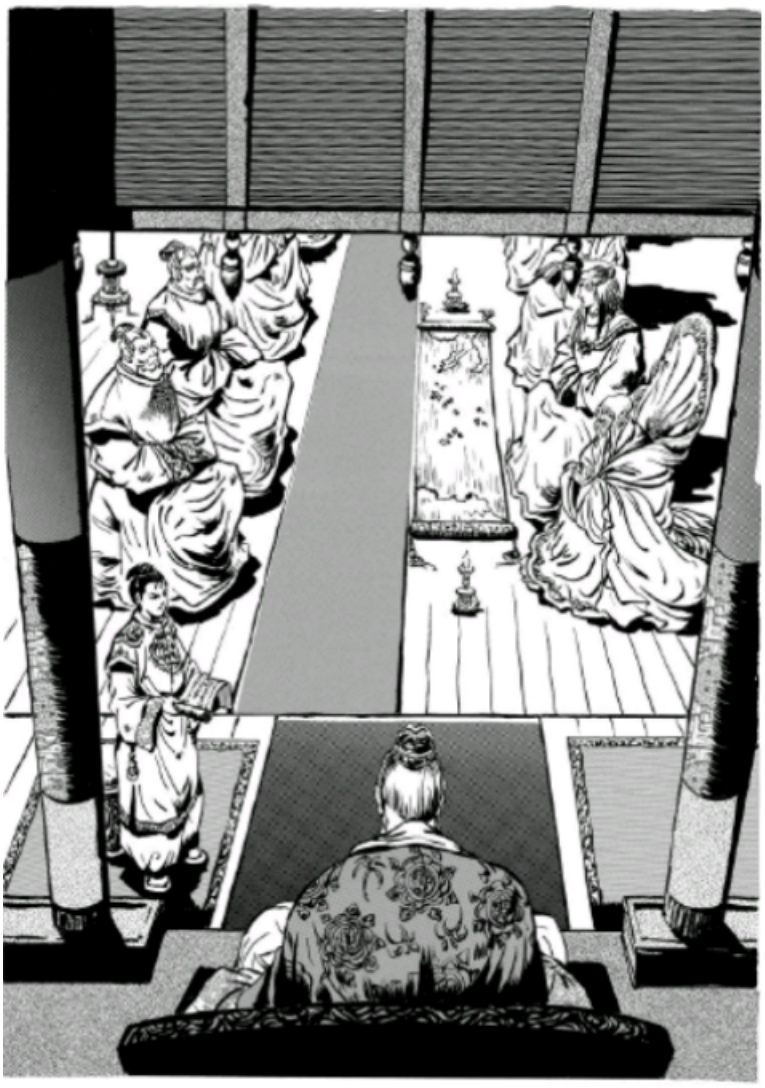
Chagum dressed for departure and traveled slowly back to Kosenkyo by cart. The sun had completely set by the time he returned to the imperial palace. The Mikado's audience with the messenger from Sangal had already begun. He was irritated that his father had decided to hold the audience without him present, but at least he hadn't missed it completely. He was dying to hear what the messenger had to say.

Transverse flutes sounded out to announce Chagum's arrival outside the audience hall. The people inside all fell silent the moment they saw him. Chagum pushed the huge door of the audience hall fully open and strode into the room.

The Mikado sat upon a throne inlaid with jewels and mother-of-pearl on a raised dais with two stone steps beneath it. The throne glimmered softly in the light of the room's lamps.

To the left and right of the throne were the Holy Sage, the Army General of New Yogo's army, his lieutenant, and several government officials. All of the people present were either members of the imperial family or Master Star Readers; consequently, the Mikado was able to present himself to the assembly without sitting behind a bamboo blind.

Everyone was seated when Chagum entered. They rose and bowed when he closed the door behind him. There was a large map of the Nayoro peninsula and Sangal laid out in the center of the hall. Chagum skirted the edge of the map and approached the Mikado's throne. He stood on the step below the Mikado, which was his designated place, and bowed deeply.



"Please forgive this interruption," Chagum said. "I have only just arrived from the mountain villa."

The Mikado nodded. "Please take your seat."

Chagum sat down on his own throne and looked around the room. The government officials and Star Readers lifted their heads and looked at him. Shuga was among them. He usually smiled when Chagum looked his way, but today his expression was uncharacteristically grim. He was sitting next to the Holy Sage with Gakai and another man clustered around him. Chagum wanted to ask Shuga what was wrong, but he couldn’t do that now; he’d come in too late.

"Scribe, read the message from Sangal now," the Mikado said in a tone of mild irritation.

The scribe brought his forehead to the floor, then stood up unfurled a scroll. He read the message in a loud, clear voice. It came from the King of Sangal and was addressed to the Mikado. As Chagum listened, his initial vague uncertainty crystallized into genuine anxiety.

The Sangal navy was engaged in a fierce struggle with Talsh forces. The Talsh kept pushing them further and further back, toward the north. They would soon invade Rasu. The King of Sangal had sent this letter to plead for aid before Sangal was entirely subjugated. Sangal desperately needed reinforcements. The Sangal kingdom was the wall that protected the northern continent from the war-torn southern continent.

The King of Sangal emphasized that if Sangal fell, New Yogo would be attacked soon after. He'd sent a similar message to the King of Rota, but New Yogo was closer to Sangal than Rota was. The King of Sangal wanted to the Mikado to send as many troops as possible to the island of Kalsh, and quickly.

The scribe sat down when he finished reading the message. The audience hall was silent as everyone considered the King of Sangal's words. The Mikado faced Chagum and asked quietly, "What do you think? Should we send reinforcements?"

The Grand Admiral of the navy, Tosa, was tempted to click his tongue. He was the father of the Second Queen. "The Crown Prince is not familiar with the situation beyond what is given in this letter," he said. "Perhaps it would be better to ask after he has heard all of our reports."

Chagum looked around the room, waiting for any others to speak. After a pause, he asked, "May I examine the letter?"

The Mikado frowned slightly, but he nodded. The scribe passed the letter to Chagum. Chagum read its contents over again, then faced his father. "Is this single scroll the only message that the King of Sangal sent?"

The Mikado nodded.

"Why would he request reinforcements in such a way? It seems we should have heard more from Sangal before the situation became this dire." He tapped the signature at the end of the scroll. "This concerns

me as well. Why is this letter from the King? Why not Princess Karina, or Queen Zina?"

Many of the government officials in the room exchanged uncomfortable glances.

"In Sangal, women wield much political power and influence," Chagum said. "As I'm certain you're aware, I'm on good terms with the royal family of Sangal. When I visited Sangal a year ago, Princess Karina promised to share any and all information regarding the Talsh threat with New Yogo in exchange for assisting her against a plot to assassinate her brother and father. But she has sent me no requests for reinforcements. Her messages suggest that the war is progressing quite differently."

The Mikado grimaced at Chagum's revelation.

"I know you're friendly with Sangal's royal family," the Mikado said. "But this message was sent from one ruler to another. I should think that the information in it would carry more weight than if it was sent from the King's sister to the Mikado's son."

Some of the government officials laughed.

Rage burned in Chagum's chest. He gritted his teeth and got himself under control. He made an effort to speak calmly. "Forgive my presumption," he said. "I hadn't considered that. But Princess Karina has sent me several updates on the war situation over the last year. I haven't heard from her in some months, which is one reason I'm so concerned about the provenance of this letter."

Chagum looked to Shuga for moral support, but Shuga refused to look at him. Chagum steeled himself and went on, "I have a strange feeling about this letter."

"Do you believe it's counterfeit?" the Mikado asked.

"No," Chagum said. "I recognize the signature. It's definitely written in King Karnan's handwriting."

"Then what is so strange about it?"

The atmosphere in the room intensified. Chagum held his breath and let it out slowly. There was definitely something off about the letter, but he didn't know how to explain his discomfort in words. He considered it

likely that Sangal had already fallen to the Talsh empire, in which case this letter could be a trap. He wanted to say something to that effect, but words stuck in his throat.

"I... Reading this letter gives me an uneasy feeling. That's all."

The Mikado shifted his gaze from Chagum to the assembled officials. "Is there anyone else that wishes to express an opinion?" he asked.

Navy Admiral Tosa raised his hand slowly. "Forgive me if I'm mistaken, but I believe that most of us previously agreed that reinforcements should be sent."

Chagum's face stiffened. He realized that Tosa had tried to warn him in order to prevent him from embarrassing himself. Even now, he was speaking as briefly as possible to bring Chagum up to speed.

"The main point of debate seems to be how much of the navy we should send," Tosa said. "There is a possibility that enemy forces could be luring us into a trap. The area around Sangal Yasheera is all open sea. It would be easy for the Talsh to ambush us there. Sailing to Kalsh has known risks. We might not be able to turn back at this time of year."

The General of New Yogo's armies, Radou, suddenly stood up. "There's no need to even consider turning back until the Talsh army is defeated. If a trap is waiting for us there, that must mean that Sangal's capital has already fallen."

Tosa said nothing. His fine-boned face was weather-beaten and bronzed by the sun, but for all his experience as a sailor, his expression greatly resembled a scholar's deep in thought. He was unlike Radou in almost every way. Radou was already itching for a fight with the Talsh; Tosa preferred to consider the situation from every side before committing himself to a course of action.

"I believe that it is possible that Sangal has already fallen," Tosa said.

Radou shook his head. "Who cares about possibilities? We're talking about what we know, not conjecture," Radou said in a tone of finality. He looked up at the Mikado.

"I think the navy should be sent, Your Imperial Majesty. If Tosa fears a trap, we should send a large fleet to counter it. If Sangal has fallen, the Talsh have a clear path to attack our nation next. In this case, defending

Sangal is the same as defending ourselves. Sangal would owe us a great debt for coming to their rescue. Sending a mere token force is out of the question. The King of Sangal would not have sent this letter unless he needed enough support to beat back the entire Talsh army."

Many of the government officials in the room nodded.

"I guess we'll be sending the entire navy, then," Tosa said quietly.

Radou's thick black eyebrows drew together. He glared at Tosa. "Yes. I have no confidence that we can defeat the Talsh unless we send the maximum possible number of men."

Tosa shook his head a little. "If Sangal really has joined hands with the Talsh empire, we'd risk losing all of our forces. We must also protect the coast and the harbor."

"You're worrying about a problem that isn't there!" Radou shot back instantly. "Our land forces can protect the coast and the harbor even if the fleet is lost. We'd still have our cavalry forces as well."

Tosa frowned. "We'd lose access to our trading partners. New Yogo would be completely cut off."

"It's a necessary risk. Our elite forces will fight the invaders for every inch of land they claim. Our country is blessed with the sacred favor of the gods. It won't fall easily."

"It's true that sealing off the harbor and fighting a land battle would slow the invaders down," Tosa said, "but when should it be sealed off, and for how long? The loss of trade harms our nation just as badly as a loss in battle. It erodes our ability to supply and defend ourselves."

Silence fell—silence that lasted. Chagum's gaze flicked back and forth between Tosa and Radou. He tried not to focus on either one of them for too long lest he be accused of favoritism later. Shuga had warned him never to reveal his thoughts and plans without consulting his trusted allies first.

You really intend to cut us off from our allies, and from trade? You're a fool, Radou.

Why wasn't Tosa pushing back more strongly against Radou's ideas? Everything Radou said was speculative; he was assuming the loss of the

navy as a foregone conclusion. Shouldn't they be discussing scenarios and strategies that were more likely?

Tosa did seem to be trying to shift the direction of the conversation. He clearly understood that if Sangal had fallen to the Talsh, then there was only one sure way to save New Yogo from the same fate. The other officials in the room remained silent.

Chagum endured the oppressive atmosphere for a few moments, but he couldn't hold himself back for long. "Father. Sending our fully navy to Sangal would weaken our defenses considerably. We should send messengers to Rota and Kanbal to request aid. That's what I think."

Every face in the room turned toward his. Radou's face contorted with rage. "Forgive me, Crown Prince, but are you suggesting that the army I command is not sufficient to the task of protecting our nation?"

The Mikado lifted his right hand in a silencing gesture. Radou muttered darkly to himself and sat down.

The Mikado looked directly at Chagum and said, "Are you saying that we do not have the strength to defend ourselves without begging foreign kings for help?"

Chagum was surprised at the force of the anger and contempt in his father's eyes. He'd never seen the Mikado so angry. His throat went dry, but he held his father's gaze.

"We wouldn't be begging for help," Chagum said. "We'd be calling on our friends. If New Yogo, Kanbal and Rota all support one another, we can't lose. The Talsh cannot defeat us if we stand together."

The contempt in the Mikado's eyes lessened somewhat as he reined in his anger. "My son," he said, "I want you to listen well and remember these words. Our nation is blessed by Ten no Kami, the God of the Heavens. If it is ever threatened, all I need do is extend my hand and call on the power of the god. Our nation needs no support from others. It never has. It never will."

The Mikado dropped his gaze from Chagum and faced the collected officials. "All right. I believe I've heard everyone's thoughts. I shall consider and make a decision in private."

The assembled officials left their seats, knelt down, and bowed deeply to the Mikado. The Mikado entered into private consultation with the Holy Sage in a separate chamber. The government officials surrounding Chagum whispered to one another in hushed tones as the Mikado withdrew.

Chagum hated being left behind. He couldn't let matters stand as they were—but he had no choice.

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The Mikado deliberated for two days before making a decision. He would send twenty ships to Sangal as reinforcements, which amounted to roughly a third of New Yogo's naval forces.

Immediately after he gave the order, soldiers and sailors poured into Choron harbor from every direction. Ships loaded up weapons, food, medicine and other supplies in great haste. Foreign merchants that arrived in the harbor at the same time thought that New Yogo was bracing for some kind of terrible disaster. Soldiers chased merchants down the street, even when they had no goods to sell; many shops and stores temporarily closed up or moved to another city to wait for the uproar to die down.

The large front gate in front of the harbor was a severe-looking landmark that served as the navy's first travel checkpoint. There were many such checkpoints between here and Sangal to guide trade ships and travelers. These were all unique to New Yogo; with any luck, no one would know how many ships New Yogo had sent until the navy reached Kalsh.

A rumor that Choron harbor would be closed as soon as the navy left the harbor spread like wildfire. Merchants made immediate plans for departure so that they wouldn't be cut off from their supply lines. Some of these merchants lingered near the harbor's large gate, mixed in with a few people from Sangal. One of these was Princess Saluna's secret messenger.

Chapter 3 - Retaliation

Chagum wandered in dreams. The world outside his window was hazy with blue pre-dawn mist; Chagum could almost see it in his dream. He felt himself lightly floating on water.

I've felt this way before.

The memory was painful. He was overwhelmed with the desire to go home—but where was he? Where was home from here? He sank into deep blue water. He felt like if he could reach the bottom, he'd finally be able to go home.

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Someone called out to Chagum while he was still sleeping. Chagum stirred and opened his eyes. His eyelashes were wet; he'd cried in his sleep. Chagum traced the trail of tears from his eyes to place below his ears with his fingertips.

"What's going on?" he asked.

Ruin, one of his attendants, was standing over his bed. He was still a child and seemed extremely nervous. "Please forgive me for waking you, Your Majesty," he said in a trembling voice. "A messenger from Princess Saluna of Sangal just arrived at the imperial palace. He seems quite anxious for you to receive the message right away. He begged me to wake you, even though it's still before dawn—"

"Prepare my clothes," Chagum said, cutting him off. "I will hear this message immediately."

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On the first day of each new month, it was the Mikado's custom to draw water from the bubbling spring inside the garden of the imperial

palace. He awoke early, dressed himself in pure white and wandered out into the morning mist surrounding the spring.

Water gushed forth from stones covering the spring where it fountained up from the ground. The air was heady with the fresh smell of green moss. The Mikado placed a plain wooden ladle into the spring and drew up a measure of water. He spun in a circle to scatter the water while praying for the prosperity of the nation. The flying water droplets reflected the light of the sun and new moon and glittered like gems.

Harsh sunlight passed over the Mikado's pale face. The Mikado closed his eyes and focused on the reddish light he could see through his eyelids while praying fervently for divine protection.

"My father, Ten no Kami, protect and guide me. These are troubled times. I ask for your guidance in choosing the best path forward."

The Mikado felt his chest thrum in resonance with the power of the god. He carried the fate of the nation on his shoulders; only the god made him strong enough to bear it. He took a deep breath and stood up straight. He was the son of a god; the wisdom to steer New Yogo in the right direction was his birthright. All of his thoughts were inspired by the god, and the god was inerrant and infallible. The Mikado believed all of this as absolute fact.

He filled a bucket with water from the spring. This water would be used to make the morning's rice porridge, which he would eat with the Holy Sage. The Mikado's attendants accepted the full bucket of water from him and followed him back inside. Today's rice porridge would be shared among five people instead of the customary two: the Holy Sage would be bringing his apprentices to breakfast.

Predawn light filtered into the eastern-facing room near the Mikado's garden. This was called the Sunrise Room. The Holy Sage and his apprentices were already present when the Mikado entered. The apprentices looked at him nervously as his attendants brought in serving dishes to distribute the rice porridge. The rich, sweet smell of the porridge and the fresh sharp scent of bitter orange tea brewing wafted through the room.

The three apprentices had nearly finished their porridge when a loud noise made them flinch. There was a commotion in the hallway

outside the Sunrise Room.

The Mikado frowned and looked up. "What is happening?"

"My sincerest apologies," a servant said from the other side of a green-and-white folding screen painted with trees. "Crown Prince Chagum is requesting an audience. He claims that the matter is urgent."

The Mikado wrinkled his forehead. He sighed, then said, "Send him in."

The sliding screen was pushed aside, revealing Chagum sitting seiza in the hallway. He bowed deeply, bringing his forehead to the floor. He stood up quickly and entered the room, stopping directly in front of the Mikado. The cold morning air blew in through the open door behind Chagum.

Chagum knelt before the Mikado and bowed his head once more. "I hate to disturb the water ceremony of the first day of the month, but I had to see you as soon as possible, father. Please forgive my terrible rudeness."

"And what is so urgent?" the Mikado asked quietly.

"Early this morning, I received a message from Princess Saluna of Sangal." He removed a letter from his breast pocket and passed it to his father. The Mikado unfolded the letter, which had been written on paper perfumed with exotic flowers.

As the Mikado's eyes scanned the letter, his expression became grim. He lifted his head and looked toward the Holy Sage. "Please read this," he said, extending his arm to give the Holy Sage the letter. "I wish to hear your thoughts."

The Holy Sage stood up and leaned forward to accept the letter. His eyes flicked toward the wax used to seal it. "There's no impression in the wax. It's blank," he said with a little frown. Then he started reading the letter, which was written in Yogoese. The script was so beautiful and fine that it was difficult to believe that a foreigner had written it.

When the Holy Sage finished the letter, he said, "Crown Prince, I would like to pass this letter to my apprentices so that they, too, may read it. Is that acceptable?"

Chagum nodded.

The Holy Sage passed the letter to Shuga. It said:

Crown Prince Chagum,

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to you for previously saving our nation from the threat of Talsh invasion. Sangal now faces a similar crisis. Sangal is extending a hand to New Yogo to request aid. We require all the help you can spare.

I will be plain: we are drowning. Sometimes the one who attempts to save a drowning man drowns themselves, but I still must ask. Sangal is like a hatchling seeking to shelter beneath the wings of its mother. You once held the lives of my brother and I in your hands, and I have not forgotten. Neither have my brothers and sisters. We are trying to chart a safe course so that our nation will not fall.

Crown Prince Chagum, if the ship of Sangal should sink, please do not grieve for us. Brave sailors survive a storm and live to see better weather. Know that you will always have my deepest gratitude. I hope I can repay your kindness and generosity one day.

No one spoke for a long while. When the letter reached Ozuru, he shook his head in confusion. "I can't understand what she's trying to say at all," he complained.

The Mikado's face expressed clear irritation. "What do you think, Holy Sage?"

"I would like to hear the Crown Prince's thoughts before expressing my own," the Holy Sage said.

Chagum's eyes fixed on the Holy Sage. "This letter came from Princess Saluna. I have no doubts about that at all. She writes of when Shuga and I concealed her and Prince Tarsan when their lives were in danger."

Shuga nodded. He explained Crown Prince Chagum's last visit to Sangal in broad outlines to the others in the room. The apprentices and the Holy Sage all nodded to indicate their understanding of the reference in Princess Saluna's letter.

"Father," Chagum said, "what if Princess Saluna is warning us of a trap?" He pointed out various sentences in the letter and began speaking quickly. "She asks me not to grieve if the ship of Sangal should sink. She requests help, but without details. Maybe she's trying to give us hints—clues so that we don't fall into a trap that the Talsh have set for us." He paused. "It seems likely that their navy is already under the control of the Talsh empire."

The Mikado frowned deeply and stared down at the letter. Gakai tilted his head to the side and said speculatively, "If I may speak... I would like to express some doubt of that claim, Your Imperial Majesty."

The Mikado nodded and gestured for Gakai to continue speaking.

Gakai frowned and stared at the floor. "If Sangal is truly surrounded or subjugated by the Talsh, why would they send such a message to the Crown Prince? Why would Princess Saluna send it, specifically? Why would she choose to warn us in such vague terms? We all know of the Crown Prince's heroic rescue of Sangal's royal family a year ago. Perhaps this letter was sent to curry favor with our nation in advance of the King of Sangal requesting aid. The messages were likely sent around the same time."

Shuga squirmed in his seat. The Mikado looked at him and asked him to speak.

"I believe there is a reason that this letter was delivered now," Shuga said. "The timing is deliberate."

The Mikado frowned in confusion. "What do you mean by that?"

"The letter came just after our naval forces mustered and sailed to Sangal. It's almost like it was delivered now to influence our decision of how much of our navy to send," Shuga said calmly. "I've spoken with Princess Saluna several times in the past. She'd never use flattery or past obligation for personal gain. She'd be much more likely to request aid for Sangal in direct terms—unless she knew that Sangal was beyond saving. It may be that Sangal will be coerced into tricking us and that this letter is meant as a warning. That is entirely in keeping with her character. Princess Saluna is genuinely grateful to Crown Prince Chagum for saving her life. Even if the rest of the royal family of Sangal

has been manipulated somehow, I doubt Princess Saluna would betray us."

Shuga looked at Chagum. "I do not believe that this letter is simply a warning. It may also be an apology."

Chagum nodded deeply. The scent of flowers on the letter was the same as the perfume she'd used when they'd first met. He remembered her clear and lively brown eyes. She would never betray him and Shuga unless she had no other choice.

"Apology?" Ozuru furrowed his eyebrows. "I see no apology. I see no warning, either. This letter makes no sense."

Chagum leaned forward and spoke in an impassioned tone. "Father, this is exactly why I had to see you right away. This message was sent to prevent our navy from sailing into a trap. If this letter was simply meant as an apology, she could have sent it later, after Talsh or Sangal attacked us. She's definitely trying to warn us."

Shuga frowned slightly. *You may be wrong, Chagum. It seems that Sangal has fallen. There may be no way to avoid the trap now.*

Princess Saluna understood politicians very well. Once a politician made a decision, they hated changing their minds. The Mikado had already sent reinforcements to Sangal; he couldn't possibly change course now. The Mikado's words were the words of Ten no Kami, the God of the Heavens. He was infallible and could never be mistaken about anything. All the Mikado could do was push forward with his original plan and await the results.

Shuga thought that Princess Saluna understood that, as well. The more he thought about it, the more Shuga considered her letter an apology. Any possible warning contained in the letter would be futile. Crown Prince Chagum should have taken the letter as Princess Saluna's attempt at an apology—and as a farewell.

This message wasn't meant for the Mikado. Maybe both the warning and the apology were meant for Chagum? Did Princess Saluna deliberately hide the warning from the Mikado because she knew he would never change his mind?

"Father, we must make use of this information," Chagum said.

The Mikado was silent for a long while. He tilted his head and stared at Chagum, whose face was flush with over-excitement. "And what is it that you expect me to do?"

Chagum's eyes opened wide in surprise. He hadn't expected the Mikado to listen to him at all. "We need to recall the navy and gather our resources here," Chagum said. "We can't send our people into danger now that we know there could be a trap."

The Mikado stared directly at Chagum. His eyes were utterly devoid of emotion. Chagum shifted uncomfortably under the pressure of his gaze. The Mikado had just realized that Chagum was an adult capable of making mature and reasoned decisions.

"I have already considered the possibility of a trap," the Mikado said in an admonishing tone. "That is why I am only sending one third of our navy. If that force discovers or falls into an enemy's trap, our nation will officially declare war. If we ascertain that Sangal did attempt to warn us, we will be able to deal honorably with them, even if they become our enemies."

A chill went up Chagum's spine. He opened his mouth slightly and stared up at his father's composed, refined politician's mask.

"I'll have Grand Admiral Tosa see to this matter personally. I am certain he would be able to see through any trap and extricate the navy without any loss of life or ships. I'll send the order now."

The Mikado's voice seemed to come from far away.

It was a logical order. Navy Grand Admiral Tosa was definitely the best man for a job like this—but Chagum swore he saw the hint of of a mischievous smile in his father's eyes.

He's trying to get grandfather out of the way. Chagum felt his bones freeze to ice. Tosa was the shield that protected Chagum's back. Ever since his adulthood ceremony, Tosa had been a guiding hand at council meetings and in other matters of governance. He'd also clearly supported Chagum from the start. He was a stoic, steely-eyes warrior; Shuga once told him that he'd taken limited interest in matters of state before Chagum came of age. He was the driving force of the faction that

supported Chagum over the Mikado. It was no surprise that the Mikado wanted to dispose of such a troublesome father-in-law.

But it would be impossible to remove Tosa from court without a good reason. He was the head of the Harusuan noble family in New Yogo and hugely popular. By insisting that the Mikado should do something about the trap set for the navy, Chagum had inadvertently given the Mikado an excuse to make Tosa disappear.

Chagum couldn't guess the scale of the potential trap waiting in Sangal, but Tosa was experienced at sea; it was likely that he would be able to avoid it or flee with the rest of the navy. It was also highly possible that he could die. Even if he survived an attack by the enemy and returned home, he would almost certainly not come back without losses. Those losses could serve as a pretext to remove him from his position as the Navy's Grand Admiral.

His father would be happy no matter what the outcome was. The loss of a competent, capable and popular leader of the navy meant nothing if he could cut off Chagum's primary source of support at the same time.

His mother's face appeared in his mind's eye. She was Tosa's daughter. She'd be so sad when she found out what happened to him. Did the Mikado consider her feelings at all? Such thoughts made Chagum's heart hurt.

Do you really hate me that much?

He'd seen the Mikado's almost-smile as he'd given the order. The Mikado had reprimanded Chagum and encouraged him to keep pushing so that he would be able to blame Tosa's eventual fate on Chagum. Nausea made his stomach roil.

Chagum felt Shuga staring at him out of the corner of his eye. He was clearly trying to tell Chagum to calm down. Grin and bear it.

But Chagum refused to be calm. He couldn't stand for this. All his emotions intensified; he couldn't repress them any longer. He looked up at the Mikado with tears in his eyes.

"You're almost certainly sending my grandfather into danger. If there really is a trap... will you do nothing to protect him?"

The Mikado’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. "You are rude," he said haughtily. "I am your father. What do you think to accuse me of?"

"If you were really my father, you wouldn’t take such delight in sending my mother’s father to his death."

Everyone in the room stood still as if they’d frozen to ice. Chagum understood that he might get cut down here for what he’d just said. If his father wanted a fight, fine. Both their swords were drawn now.

Chagum glared at his father with tears streaming down his face. His shoulders shook with rage.

"Apologize immediately," the Holy Sage called out in a loud, clear voice. He stood up and faced Chagum head-on. Chagum met the Holy Sage’s stare with burning eyes. He had no intention of apologizing. He’d meant every word he said.

"Enough," the Mikado said in a disinterested tone. A tiny smile played around the edges of his lips. "It seems the Crown Prince thinks he knows the course our country should take better than I. Maybe he believes he’d be a better Mikado than I am."

Shuga’s feet froze to the floor. He hunched in on himself and shook. *What’s he going to do to Chagum?*

The Mikado was still smiling as he said, "Chagum. You’re demonstrated your competence in the past, so I shall delegate this

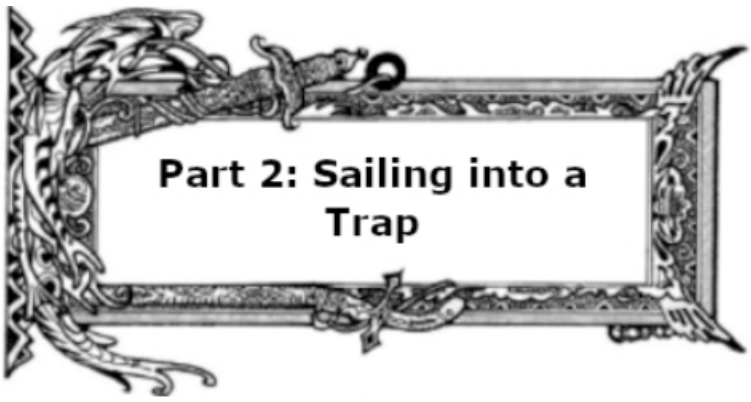
situation to you. Accompany your grandfather to Sangal and save him from falling into the hands of our enemies."

Everyone held their breath. The Mikado ignored the ashen faces of his advisors and looked at the Holy Sage. "It seems the Crown Prince will be crossing the Yaltash ocean. Perhaps the water spirit he once saved will protect him now. Have you heard that the people call him Torugal reborn?"

Shuga started to stand, thinking to beg the Mikado to allow him to go with Chagum to Sangal, but the Holy Sage stepped in front of him to shield him from the Mikado's gaze. The Holy Sage must have guessed what Shuga wanted to ask.

He sat down again, his fervor to save Crown Prince Chagum no matter the cost temporarily quashed by practicality. He wasn't going to give up, but he understood what he had to do in this moment.

Shuga stared down at the floor and forced his expression blank.



Part 2: Sailing into a Trap

Chapter 1 - The Voyage

Chagum stood on the deck of a ship with the wind blowing his hair back. The sails above him flapped and fluttered constantly in the strong, salt-smelling breeze. The pure white of the sails contrasted sharply with the deep blue of the surrounding sea.

Chagum narrowed his eyes and looked up at the sky. No matter where he went, the sky was always the same. He found that vaguely comforting.

"Did you sleep well?" Tosa had noticed him.

"Yes, I slept very well." Chagum squinted up at his grandfather. He'd grown a lot that year, but Tosa was still taller than him. He was the tallest man on the ship, which made him easy to find no matter where he stood on the deck. He stood firm with his feet planted on the deck, his white hair fluttering in the sea breeze. Until this voyage, Chagum had never seen Tosa in this role: as the captain of his own ship.

"I sleep better here than I ever did at the palace," Chagum said. "The sound of the waves is very soothing."
Tosa smiled at him. "You aren't a sailor, but you've already found your sea legs. You're definitely my grandson." He smiled again.

Chagum and Tosa were following the bulk of the main naval force that had previously been sent to Sangal as reinforcements. The ship they stood on was much smaller and faster than a typical warship or cargo ship.

When Chagum had first caught up to Tosa and told him about the Mikado's orders, he'd been shocked. After receiving Chagum's message, Tosa had gone belowdecks and shut himself in his cabin alone for hours. But there was no trace of anxiety or distress on his face now.

Chagum felt strangely liberated, like a flying kite whose string had snapped—but he was not entirely free. He was still compelled to do everything he could to prevent the navy from sailing into a trap.

Even if Chagum and Tosa managed to survive this campaign, there was no future for either of them at the imperial court. They could never go home.

Chagum's protectors for this journey were two of the Mikado's Hunters, Jin and Yun. Both men had been ordered alternately to either kill Chagum or protect him over the years, so their presence on this voyage was somewhat ambivalent. Chagum understood their dual role as both assassins and protectors very well. It was possible that they'd been assigned to him as a formality so that his leaving court alone would look less suspicious; it was also possible that they'd been sent to kill him.

Chagum tried not to worry about whether or not he'd be assassinated. They were all on the same ship, so he couldn't run or hide anywhere. Jin and Yun had protected him often enough in the past. He wanted to trust them, but the Mikado's orders were absolute. They would have to carry those orders out no matter what they were. Begging for mercy would be useless.

Chagum and Tosa had to save as many people as they could, even if death awaited them afterwards. The sailors of New Yogo's fleet were innocent; they didn't deserve to be sacrificed on the altar of the Mikado's ambition. Chagum also hoped that Ruin, the servant who'd accompanied him, would make it home somehow. He didn't want anyone else to suffer because of him.

If Jin and Yun planned to force some kind of confrontation, they would probably do it after New Yogo's forces caught up with Sangal's navy. If a trap really was waiting for them, they'd probably encounter it somewhere near the island of Kalsh. Jin and Yun could easily use the chaos caused by the trap to make Chagum's death look like an accident.

Chagum felt strangely empty—devoid of thought and emotion. He was afraid, but the fear didn't paralyze him. The ship cutting through the white-frothing blue waves was so beautiful. Bright sunlight played over the hull and shone off the fish that leaped from the surface of the water.

If only Shuga were here, he thought. *He'd probably know the name of all these fish species and how much they sell for at the market.*

Tears formed at the corners of Chagum's eyes. A tear fell down his cheek and was blown away by the wind. Tosa looked away from him to give him some privacy while he cried.

Shuga had taught Chagum so much, but it would all come to nothing. Chagum should have reacted more maturely to Princess Saluna's letter. His rage had made him lash out without thinking of the consequences. He pursed his lips.

He never thought his father would be so cruel. He would have behaved differently if he'd known how far his father was willing to go. But he'd misread the entire situation from the start. The Mikado had manipulated him easily. This was already a trap for him, regardless of what Sangal did.

He could almost hear Shuga scolding him: "Your Majesty, what were you thinking?! Were you even thinking at all?"

Someday—if he lived—Chagum would get the time to indulge in reflection and regrets, but he couldn't undo what he'd already done.

Chagum sighed deeply. He still felt strangely blank and empty.

"Are you going to run away?" Tosa asked.

Chagum laughed. "Well, I guess I could float and follow a current. I did learn to swim in the lake behind the mountain villa."

Tosa shook his head grimly. "Swimming in that lake and swimming in the ocean are entirely different. If you ever do fall in, focus on floating. If you flounder around too much, you'll sink.

"There are a few small islands around Kalsh. There are also reefs and shoals that are dangerous for ships as well as swimmers. A number of currents intersect near Kalsh, making that part of the ocean difficult to navigate."

Chagum's expression became serious. It seemed that it would also be easy for Jin and Yun to take advantage of an accident at sea. They wouldn't even have to kill him—all they'd have to do was throw him overboard. As Chagum listened to his grandfather tell him how to survive if he was stranded in the middle of the ocean, he remembered something Princess Saluna had told him at the end of his last visit to Sangal.

"I've heard about a girl who sailed from Rasu to the Moon Palace all alone," he said.

Tosa frowned. "That's probably just a tale. One girl wouldn't be able to sail such a distance without help."

Chagum shook his head. "It's not a tale; it's true. She was one of the Rassharou people."

Tosa smiled a little and nodded in understanding. "I see. She was born on the sea. Perhaps such a journey would be possible for her."

"Have you met any of the Rassharou, grandfather?"

"I have. They stop at the fishing villages on Nayoro peninsula sometimes. The Rassharou don't respect national borders, and they have no enemies. The sea is their home."

Chagum looked out at the ocean. It was so deep and dark that he couldn't see the bottom. His grandfather's words echoed inside his mind. What would it be like to live on the sea and ignore the borders between nations?

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The fleet entered the warmer, shallower water surrounding the Sangal peninsula a few days later. Islands appeared in the middle distance, rising up out of waves that sparkled brightly in the sun. The water closest to these islands was a pale aquamarine blue that Chagum had never seen before. He saw beaches full of white sand and green forests thick with tropical vegetation from his high vantage point on the ship's deck.

The weather had gotten warmer as the voyage progressed, so Chagum no longer wore his coat, choosing to dress himself like the other sailors instead. The shirts and shorts they wore were made of a light white fabric. Chagum would have preferred to go shirtless like the rest of the sailors on board, but Tosa had scolded him when he'd first tried it. He didn't like how it would appear to their own men and to outsiders, since Chagum was the Crown Prince. He also worried about Chagum getting severely sunburned.

So Chagum wore a shirt without complaining, but he thought his grandfather's overanxious concern was a little silly. They were on the ocean, hundreds of miles from New Yogo; his rank really shouldn't matter here. He couldn't spend too much time with the other sailors, anyway; most of them were scared that they'd go blind if they looked him in the eyes. Even when they had messages for him, they kept their eyes cast down. Chagum's servant, Ruin, suffered from terrible seasickness and spent most of his time belowdecks.

I don't think anyone would look at me even if I was naked, Chagum thought. He laughed to himself.

The sailors didn't look at Chagum, but he often observed them while they were working. When he observed their quick, efficient movements, he was a little jealous. He would have liked to be a sailor. He could have spent the days talking and working with the others instead of sitting by himself and being bored.

Tosa seemed to sense the restlessness in him; he spent a portion of each day teaching Chagum about the ocean and sailing just as if he was a new sailor that had recently joined the crew. He showed Chagum how to mark time and the distance to nearby islands by using the placement of the sun. At night, he pointed out constellations and taught Chagum how to steer the ship in the dark.

Chagum also spent part of every day writing a long letter to his mother. He hadn't been able to say goodbye to her before leaving for Sangal. He was afraid of dying, but he was also strangely at peace with the idea of his life ending. He often wondered why he'd even been born. The understanding that he would never have to go back to the palace and live that life again felt like being freed from prison shackles.

He was a little ashamed of how resigned he felt toward his own death. He should probably try to fight harder in his own defense, but the only people he truly felt sorry for were the few friends he had in the palace, like his mother, Shuga, and Mishuna. When he thought about what would happen to them with him gone, it hurt to breathe.

The flaws in New Yogo's system of government became painfully obvious after his adulthood ceremony, but whenever he suggested changes, those suggestions were met with contempt by his father and

other government officials. Those who attempted to help Chagum advance his agenda earned nothing but the Mikado's ire. Whenever Chagum tried to make a move, he was immediately thwarted. The more he struggled, the more trapped he felt.

One day, your time will come. We must wait and hope for that time.

Shuga had said something like that to him more times than he could count, but Chagum was difficult to encourage. The strain of maintaining his pure facade while being unable to change anything at all gradually wore down his spirit. Everything he saw and heard in the palace only added to his distress. He felt like a beetle confined to a small box with the air slowly running out.

And now Chagum had been banished—sent to his death as an act of retaliation.

I'm sure my mother and Shuga are worried sick. He couldn't even leave behind a letter for Shuga, who had worked so hard in educating him. Receiving a letter from Chagum now would worsen Shuga's standing at court. He included some of the things he wanted to say to Shuga in his letter to his mother in the hope that his words would provide some comfort to them when he was gone.

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One night, there was a loud knock on the door to Chagum's cabin.

"Your Majesty," Tosa said from the other side of the door.

Chagum rubbed his eyes and sat up. Ruin, who was sleeping in the corner of the room, quickly stood up as soon as he realized Chagum was awake. He gave Chagum an uncertain look, glancing between him and the door.

Chagum nodded to Ruin to indicate that he should let Tosa in. Ruin opened the door and led Tosa into the cabin.

Tosa immediately apologized when he noticed that Chagum had still been asleep.

Chagum shook his head. "After a long day with the wind in my face, I fell asleep almost immediately, so I feel fine now. Please tell me why you

came."

"It's not an emergency, but the sea looks...strange. I wanted you to take a look and tell me what you thought."

Chagum's eyes lit up. "I'll go see. Show me."

Ruin helped him dress. "Apparently it's a strange sight," Chagum said. "Do you want to come up and see it with me, Ruin?"

Ruin frowned. "I'd rather not, Your Majesty." Ruin clearly hated the sea.

"All right. Feel free to stay here and rest," Chagum said.

The smile Ruin gave him expressed genuine relief. "Thank you, Your Majesty. I shall remain here."

Chagum and Tosa headed up to the deck together. It was still dark; the sky overhead was a sheet of glittering stars. Chagum had often stood on the deck at night during this voyage, but the sky had never been this clear before. The moon was almost full and very bright. The quality of the moonlight made the deck look like it was covered in a fine layer of frost.

"It's there," Tosa said, pointing to the upper deck. There were no other sailors nearby. Tosa smiled, climbed up to the upper deck and looked down at the sea.

When Chagum saw what he was looking at, he gasped.

In the waves churning around the ship's prow, Chagum saw faint flecks of blue-green light glowing brightly in the dark. The more agitated water that the ship had disturbed with its passage glowed even brighter than the rest of the ocean.

Chagum extended the scope of his vision and saw more glowing flecks floating on the waves surrounding the ship on every side. The ship left a glowing trail in its wake. Chagum thought the ship was like a comet in a sea full of floating stars.

It was beautiful, but also a little frightening. "Grandfather, where does this light come from?"

"Sandworms," Tosa said, "though I've never seen so many in one place before."

"Sandworms?"

"They’re an insect that lives in the water and on beaches. They look like tiny grains of sand, but they glow while they’re in the water. The Rassharou often use them to fish at night."

Chagum found it hard to believe that all those tiny glowing points of light were insects. "What about that big blob of light, right there?"

"That’s probably a fish. Such a large concentration of sandworms causes anything underwater to light up like that. Fishermen in New Yogo call sandworms urora sura, the shooting stars of the sea. They always clap for joy when they see them. They’re rare in the north. Many people think they’re good luck."

Something wet and slimy passed over Chagum’s cheek. He stepped back, recoiling a little in surprise. Tosa was still speaking, but his voice seemed to come from far away.

A light shone from Chagum’s forehead. He suddenly heard another voice calling out to him.

But it wasn’t a voice, exactly. Chagum recognized the call as the same feeling he’d experienced as a child while hosting the egg of the water spirit. All he wanted to do was go home. He smelled the water of Nayugu, vivid and intense; the air around him was like the charged air that followed a lightning strike.

Chagum felt like he was standing in two places: part of him remained on the deck of the ship with his grandfather while another part of him sank deep into Nayugu’s water. Everyone else on the ship—and the ship itself—were also submerged in Nayugu’s bright blue water.

Chagum heard a sound like a thousand bells ringing at once. The water around him was so bright that it appeared to be shot through with bright afternoon sunlight. Chagum looked up at the light and froze.

Far above the sails, all the way up in the sky, he saw a bright blue trail like a river of light. It looked like a tightly clustered trail of stars extending as far as his eyes could see—but the stars were moving. Moving, slowly but surely, from the south to the north. Towards home.

Chagum's eyes widened. *That's not a river, and those aren't stars. Those are living creatures, and they're moving*. The reflection of their migration was reflected on the surface of Nayugu's ocean.

The sound of bells was almost unbearably loud in Chagum's ears. When he turned around to identify the source of the sound, he saw the face of a Yona Ro Gai—one of Nayugu's water dwellers. Its hair was like seaweed and its eyes were huge and hyper-alert like those of a fish. It was looking directly at him.

Slurred syllables reached Chagum through Nayugu's water; the Yona Ro Gai was speaking. "It's spring," it said. More voices called out to him, all saying the same thing: "It's spring. It's spring." Their voices surrounded him in a lively chorus like a celebratory song. Bubbles streamed from their mouths, covering Chagum completely.

"Your Majesty?"

Tosa's voice snapped Chagum out of Nayugu. He wiped sweat that smelled like the sea from his forehead.

"Is something wrong?" Tosa asked. He sounded worried.

Chagum took a deep breath and looked up at his grandfather. "I think my imagination's playing tricks on me," Chagum said. His breathing steadied as he spoke. "I'm sorry if I startled you. I'm fine."

He knew that this part of the ocean where all the sandworms had gathered was closely connected to Nayugu. The chorus of Yona Ro Gai voices echoed in his ears.

It's spring in Nayugu. What does that mean? He thought about some of the strange rumors he'd heard about before leaving the palace and smiled. *I wish Tanda and Shuga were here so I could tell them all about this...*

He always felt a little foggy and dazed after seeing Nayugu, but he didn't really mind the feeling. He had many memories of Nayugu; those memories were connected to experiences he never wanted to forget. He'd managed to free himself from his role as a prince solely because of Nayugu, even if only for a brief time. He'd seen Nayugu many times, but now...

Chagum looked up at the impossibly clear and starry sky. *Now, it's the end. There are only a few nights left.*

He wasn't afraid. When he died, his soul could return to Nayugu at long last. Part of himself, at least, would be able to go home.

Chapter 2 - Islands Form a Net

When the ship caught sight of the Kalsh archipelago, all the sailors on deck fell silent. Kalsh was the largest island, but it was surrounded by many others in an irregular pattern. Chagum looked out at the islands on the fringes of the archipelago and frowned. This would definitely be a good place to spring a trap.

"Some of the gaps between the islands are really narrow," he said. "Will we be able to pass through?"

Tosa nodded at him. "This is a dangerous area. The water is very shallow in places and there are several strong currents that may try to pull us off-course. Ships can also conceal themselves in the narrow spaces between islands. But to the people of Sangal, this place is like their own garden. They're familiar with every inch of it."

Tosa smiled tightly. "If there's going to be a trap, we'll likely get caught in it here. The Mikado pretended that there was a possibility that Sangal would deal honestly with us, but I think that's unlikely. From a tactical standpoint, this is the best place to lure us into any trap they've prepared. It's also highly visible. If the Talsh are watching, they'll be able to observe both Sangal's actions and our own. If I were choosing a place to attack us, I would definitely choose this one."

Tosa squinted out at the scattering of islands and muttered, "The people of Sangal are born on or near the ocean; their navy is the strongest and the most capable in the world. If the Talsh have conquered them, they must be tremendously powerful."

Chagum glanced fearfully up at his grandfather. "If Sangal has fallen, we're next."

Tosa regarded him sternly for a moment, then said, "We can probably protect ourselves for a while. Radou's men will defend the harbor from invasion by land forces. He'll cut us off from the rest of the world, which will inhibit Talsh's ability to reach us. The winner of such a struggle seems inevitable."

New Yogo was outmatched and outnumbered; it would be overrun if it didn’t surrender. Chagum tried not to let his despair show on his face. This despair was not the same kind he’d felt while being surrounded by sycophants and betrayers at court; it was the complete and utter helplessness of a grain of sand being gradually eroded by the ocean’s waves.

"Your Majesty," Tosa said quietly, "the war isn’t over yet. Don’t you want to use this time to learn more about the situation, so that we can think of countermeasures against the Talsh?"

Chagum opened his eyes wide and nodded deeply. "Yes. Please teach me what you know of the Talsh. I want to find a way to stop them."

Tosa smiled. "All right. Follow me to my cabin. I’ll teach you while we look at my map of the ocean and the southern continent."

Bright sunlight reflected off the deck as they descended to the ship’s cabins. As Chagum’s eyes adjusted to the darkness, Tosa unfurled a map of the sea on his desk with brisk, efficient movements. The map was entirely unlike the topographical maps Chagum was used to seeing. Islands were outlined with some detail, but the bulk of the map was taken up with markings for currents and directional bearings in the water, drawn with inks in many different colors.

"This is an Ozam map," Tosa said. "They were originally created in Sangal, but some of our people also draw them. Most of them look something like this. Here’s Choron," he said, pointing to New Yogo’s main harbor. "And here’s the Sangal peninsula, which runs parallel to Nayoro peninsula to the west." Tosa pointed to places on the map as he named them.

"Your Majesty, look here. The distance from the tip of Nayoro peninsula to the tip of Sangal, where the Moon Palace is located, can be traveled in five days with favorable winds. Doesn’t that seem rather far?"

"It really does," Chagum said. "They look like they’re right next to each other." He frowned. "And I don’t see any islands between here and there. We had to go even further south to get to the islands surrounding Kalsh."

Tosa smiled. "Yes. There are no ports between the Nayoro peninsula and the Sangal peninsula. It takes a lot of resources and time to make such a journey. Supplying ships, choosing safe routes and other logistics become progressively difficult as the number of ships to be sent increases.

"This area here is called the Dead Sea, Tara Ucham. It is said that crossing it was Torugal's greatest challenge in reaching the shores of New Yogo for the first time. And here we are, right at the edge of it." Tosa's voice was fluid and easy, almost melodic. The story he was referencing told the history of New Yogo's founding. Torugal had come up from the southern continent to found a new nation in the north.

"Our esteemed ancestor Torugal was becalmed in the Dead Sea for many days, without wind or rain or any place to seek safe harbor. He prayed for Ten no Kami to fill his sails with wind; ultimately, he did reach New Yogo's coast, just off the tip of Nayoro peninsula. Ever since that time, the peninsula has proved critical in protecting us from threats by sea."

Chagum glanced up at his grandfather. "What does that mean?"

"Your Majesty, do you remember how the wind changes directions with the seasons, especially between the Nayoro peninsula and Sangal?"

"The wind blows from the sea in summer, but from the north in winter. The warm air over the sea collides with the colder air and creates windstorms and huge whirlpools called rakkaral. By autumn, the wind from the north reaches the tip of the Nayoro peninsula and the places further south."

"Exactly right. Torugal's fleet landed sometime between spring and summer. At that time, warm winds blew from Sangal toward the Nayoro peninsula, which allowed them to navigate safely out of the Dead Sea. If he'd tried to cross the ocean in fall or winter, I don't believe he would have landed on Nayoro peninsula. He may not have made it to New Yogo at all. The rakkaral become more intense as summer changes to autumn. We've seen them close to our own shores, though they're much more common in the south. It's dangerous to sail these waters right now. Not even Sangalese ships like sailing this area at this time of year,

since it’s easy to become becalmed or dashed across the shoals due to shifting winds. It’s the slow season for trade with Sangal."

Chagum nodded in understanding.

"The winds of winter are called takum. The wind blows us directly toward Sangal in that season, so it’s relatively easy to travel then. The only real obstacle is the Dead Sea." Tosa pointed to a yellow line connected to Nayoro peninsula on the map. "The Chuchum current will take us to the edge of the Sangal peninsula, if we can find it." He frowned. "But if we’re blown off-course, we’ll likely wind up in the Dead Sea. It’s difficult to navigate there; the only fixed landmarks are the stars. Getting stuck there would slow us down considerably." Tosa suddenly grinned. "Fortunately, I know where to find the Chuchum current."

Talking about the sea in such detail was clearly exciting for Tosa. Chagum enjoyed listening to his careful explanations of where they were and where they were going. He looked up at Tosa with shining eyes.

"So the best time for Sangal to attack us is the beginning of summer," Chagum said. "And the best time for us to attack them is in autumn."

Tosa nodded at him. "We’ve used the last gasp of the northern winds to make it around the Dead Sea, but from here on out, we’ll be working against the wind. It’s early summer. Our enemies could attack us fairly easily until the next full moon, but after that, they would have to wait a while, unless they were willing to sacrifice many men and ships to the weather."

"Why until the next full moon?"

"Because that’s when the winds will change again. Still, I’m not expecting them to attack very soon. If Sangal has fallen, its fall is recent. Unless they’re making plans right now to attack us, they’ll almost certainly have to wait to stage a full assault on New Yogo. I doubt they’re coordinated well enough to launch an immediate attack."

"So you think they’ll attack us next summer?"

Tosa shook his head. "I suspect the Talsh empire will force them to move faster than that. They're probably mustering on all of Sangal's islands, settling up supply routes and recruiting soldiers."

"When do you think they're coming, then?"

Tosa smiled bitterly. "If Sangal lures us into a trap successfully, that will likely serve as proof of their obedience to the Talsh empire. Sangal will have committed to its cause, and us to ours. It seems clear that the Talsh are after the northern continent. We should all be preparing for war."

New Yogo lacked the soldiers to defeat such a large army from the south—how else could they be expected to prepare? Crushing anxiety made Chagum fall silent.

Tosa seemed to sense his mood. "Please don't make that face. The ocean between the northern and southern continents is vast. The Talsh may be a powerful nation, but they can't attack us over land. They must cross that ocean first.

"I'm going to call together all of our captains to brief them on the trap. It's my duty to tell them everything we know or suspect about Talsh's plans."

***

Tosa met with all the ships' captains on board the fleet's flagship. The flagship was anchored close to the large outcropping of rock that marked the edge of the archipelago surrounding Kalsh. This was the border between New Yogo and Sangal; as soon as the fleet sailed all the way to Kalsh, there would be no going back. The water here was so shallow that the warships ran the risk of running aground and getting stuck.

After Tosa relayed his fears about their current situation and proposed his strategy, the other captains glanced apprehensively at each other. "It sounds like you're asking us to think like flying fish instead of like sharks, Grand Admiral."

Tosa nodded decisively and looked into the faces of each of the assembled captains. "We're at a delicate place in our mission. One push

will decide our fate, one way or another. We can't control where the attack comes from or what its scope will be. All we can control is our own reaction."

Tosa's first order was to send every ship back to New Yogo, with the exception of the flagship. "No matter what move Sangal makes here, it is my responsibility to ensure that as many lives as possible are spared," Tosa said. "If any of your ships are attacked on the way back to New Yogo, do not engage. Flee. Use every means at your disposal to get away. I will do my utmost to preserve the flagship."

The assembled captains frowned. Some looked afraid. Tosa gave them an encouraging smile. "Why the long faces, captains? I'm sure you understand my plan. The flagship will serve as bait for Sangal's navy. They'll chase me and give the rest of you time to escape."

The captains stomped their feet and brought their fists to their chests in a Yogoese salute to acknowledge their orders.

Chagum heard the deliberations from his hiding place in a tiny room behind the ship's sails. Tosa's voice wasn't loud, but it carried well.

The captains returned to their own ships to make preparations. Tosa lifted aside the flap of sail that served as a door to the room Chagum was in and entered. He led Chagum out of the small room and guided him toward the captain's quarters.

The red light of sunset poured through a square porthole inside the room. Tosa stood near the porthole; his face was half in the light and half in shadow.

"I would like you to wear the uniform of a naval officer, Your Majesty," Tosa said. "I also think it would be best to style your hair in the same way as the other sailors in order to better conceal your identity."

Chagum nodded. If the enemy managed to take him hostage and learned that he was the Crown Prince, he could easily be used against New Yogo in the coming war. It was likely that the Mikado's Hunters would kill him before letting that happen, but at least if he was dressed as an ordinary officer, his corpse might be overlooked by their enemies.

No one would know that he was dead until a long time after it happened.

"I agree," Chagum said. "I'll do it."

Tosa leaned forward and said, "You must survive. No matter what happens, survive. Promise me."

Chagum's heart hurt. He stared at the floor and said, "You, too."

The corners of Tosa's eyes crinkled in a smile. He bowed and left the room to retrieve Chagum's uniform.

***

A little before noon, the sound of a bell rang out above the main mast. "Sangal ships on the horizon!" the sailor in the crow's nest shouted. Three small Sangalese ships were sailing toward them from the direction of Kalsh. They moved surprisingly quickly; Chagum knew they had to be moving against the wind. They seemed to glide over the water like graceful sea creatures.

The closest ship to theirs flew a flag embroidered with gold thread to indicate its status as an agile guiding ship, used to assist larger and slower ships past obstacles. Strong, tall Sangalese sailors waved

heartily to the sailors standing aboard New Yogo's flagship as they came closer.

One of the men on the guiding ship used a ceramic device in the shape of a horn to magnify his voice. In fluent Yogoese, he called out: "Sailors of New Yogo, welcome! We thank you for coming to help us in a time of crisis. I command the ship that guides the rest of Sangal's navy, which is gathered around Kalsh. Shallows and whirlpools are common dangers in this area, so please, follow us!"

The man dropped the ceramic horn and gave orders to turn his ship around. The other two ships accompanying his also turned sharply and started sailing back to Kalsh. Their sails were embroidered with the figures of beautiful red and yellow tropical birds.

Tosa ordered New Yogo's flagship to follow the guiding ship. Chagum glanced behind himself reflexively and noticed the other nineteen ships in the fleet holding their position. They would likely flee as soon as the flagship was out of sight. After they left, all possibility of Chagum ever returning home would be gone.

The faces of his mother, Shuga and his little sister Mishuna all rose up in his mind's eye. Thinking of them made him remember his old friends: Balsa, Tanda and Torogai. He would never see them again.

Chagum watched the white waves frothing behind the ship as they sailed on. When he lifted his eyes from the water, he felt the eyes of someone on him and turned around.

Jin was standing in the shadow of the main mast, staring directly at him. He'd been ordered to kill Chagum once, but he'd also fought off the monster, Rarunga, and saved his life. Looking at him now, Chagum felt certain that the Mikado had ordered Jin to kill him again. His face had no expression. When he noticed Chagum's stare, he turned around and climbed to the upper deck.

***

New Yogo's flagship sailed behind the Sangal navy's guiding ship into the heart of Kalsh's archipelago. They were soon surrounded by islands

and rocks on every side. The guiding ship cleverly navigated complex currents and avoided hidden reefs and shoals as they advanced. There were some small islands that were so close together that New Yogo's ship could scarcely pass through the gaps between them. Whenever a steep cliff or a lush green forest blocked the ship's line of sight, Chagum wondered if the enemy was lying in wait for them just ahead.

"Where do you think they're taking us?" Chagum asked. He was dressed in the navy blue uniform of an officer.

Tosa gave precise instructions to the men surrounding him in order to keep them within hailing distance of the guiding ship. He turned toward Chagum. "Probably to Kalsh's main island," he said.

That was where Sangal's navy was supposedly docked. The pace of the guiding ship gradually slowed down in the afternoon. At first, Chagum thought they must be getting close to their destination, but they kept sailing for several more hours. When it was closer to sunset than it was to noon, he began to worry about being trapped out here at night.

Tosa nodded when Chagum expressed this concern, but he seemed completely calm. He focused solely on navigation.

Some of the sailors lit torches as the sun went down. They could see what was happening on board, but the surrounding sea was completely dark. Smoke from the torches wafted across the deck.

In the last light of sunset, the outlines of a huge island appeared on the horizon. It appeared to be a single land mass at first, but as the ship got closer, Chagum could see that Kalsh was a large, flat island surrounded by tall sea cliffs. It was hard to make out much detail in the dark, but Chagum could just barely see the sails of several ships anchored near the island.

The sound of a Sangalese flute playing a high note reached them from the direction of the island; it was undoubtedly announcing their ship's arrival. The sound of more flutes echoed across the water.

I remember that sound.

Chagum had heard Sangalese shaguram flutes many times before. As he looked out at the strong sailors standing on the ship that had guided

them here, he remembered Prince Tarsan's brilliant smile. He'd put up a good fight at the start of the war between Sangal and Talsh; at the end of Chagum's last visit to Sangal, he'd sailed off to war. Chagum hadn't heard from him in a long time. He suddenly hoped that Tarsan wasn't here. He didn't ever want to face him as an enemy.

Tosa lifted his hand and gave the command to stop the ship. Sangalese rowboats approached their ship. The flags they flew were yellow and red and impossibly long, like streamers dancing in the wind. The rowboats came right up to the ship's side, so close that they almost touched its hull.

The main Sangalese ship that had come to greet them was enormous. The men on the deck were closely packed together and standing at attention. A man holding the same kind of ceramic voice amplifier the captain of the guiding ship had used called out to them: "Thank you for coming, sailors of New Yogo! I command the ships surrounding Kalsh. My name is Koui Olran."

Tosa took up a voice amplifier, which the Yogoese called a toro, and called back, "Thank you for your welcome, Commander Olran. I am the Grand Admiral of the Navy of New Yogo. My name is Tosa Harusuan. Our nation received your request for aid, which is why we have come."

Commander Olran grinned wryly. "Many thanks for your consideration, Grand Admiral Harusuan... but did you truly bring just one ship to pledge to Sangal's cause?"

Tosa laughed. "No, no; I brought twenty ships here from New Yogo. They're waiting back where you found us. Even twenty is not a large number of ships, but all the men I've brought are sea-hardened warriors and veterans of many storms and battles. Just tell us where you need us, and I'll send my ships there directly to beat back the Talsh."

Commander Olran nodded. He extended his hand in a beckoning gesture.

"We're much obliged to you, Grand Admiral. I'd like to request that you cross over to our ship so that we can speak more easily. We don't have much to offer, I'm afraid, but I'd be pleased if you accepted our hospitality."

Tosa shook his head. "I apologize, but I must decline. We are in the middle of a war, Commander. I have no time to accept your hospitality. Tell me where to send my ships, and I'll be on my way."

Commander Olran snapped his mouth shut and stared hard at Tosa. The light of sunset stained the sky red and reflected off the shields and weapons of all the sailors standing on the deck. The only sounds were the waves pressing against the sides of their ships and the wind in filling their sails.

There was something resigned and almost sad in Commander Olran's eyes. "Lord Harusuan, let's not mince words. Throw down your weapons and board our ship. If you surrender without a fight, you'll be treated honorably as befits your rank. That applies to your men as well. I swear it."

Tosa shook his head again. "This ship was given to me by the Mikado. I cannot let it fall into the hands of the enemy under any circumstances."

Commander Olran sighed. "Stand down, Lord Harusuan. You're severely outnumbered here. It seems that you've already guessed at the situation, which is why you ordered your other ships to turn around. Don't waste your life and the lives of your men in pointless resistance."

"Commander Olran," Tosa said, "you are a man of Sangal, born on the sea—I have no doubt that you're an excellent sailor. Why would you submit to a land-based empire like the Talsh, which has no love for the sea?" Tosa met Commander Olran's gaze across the distance separating their ships.

Commander Olran grimaced. "Have you ever seen the Talsh navy, Lord Harusuan? Their ships fly black sails. When they gather and sail together, they appear as a giant stormcloud floating over the ocean. No matter how many of their ships we sank, they just kept coming. Then their true warships came, larger and stronger than the others—and there was no end to them, either."

Commander Olran described Sangal's long campaign of attrition against the Talsh empire. "In the end, we did not lose to them in battle," he said. "We lost because we lacked the resources to continue the fight. We've never had to fight for such a long time without a break

to resupply; our resources stretched themselves too thin. Our men were dying; we kept running out of food and water and armor and weapons. The King and his wife and sisters began to question whether or not the war was worth fighting. The price of victory seemed too high. Even if we did manage to win somehow, the cost in both money and lives would be too great. The result of the royal family's calculations and deliberations is the current situation."

Commander Olran spread his hands and shrugged. "This is the price of Sangal's autonomy. If we bring you in, Sangal will be permitted to govern its own affairs in both war and trade." Commander Olran's voice expressed sincere grief.

"Please don't die needlessly, Lord Harusuan. None of this is personal. It's all about strategy. This is how Sangal has chosen to bargain to keep itself free. We will take you captive and give your ship to the Talsh as a sign of good faith. It is impossible for New Yogo to win against the Talsh empire."

Silence fell. Even the waves seemed quiet.

Tosa nodded his head up and down once. "I understand. Take us prisoner, Commander Olran."

Chagum and the sailors standing around Tosa went rigid with shock. Chagum couldn't believe what he'd just heard. Tosa had as good as ordered the men aboard the flagship to give themselves up without a fight. He didn't even look ashamed of himself for giving such an order.

Tosa unsheathed his sword from his belt and slammed the stone guard at the end of his scabbard on the deck. "Samul! Torok! Report!"

Two men carrying torches rushed toward Tosa. "Yes, sir!" they called out in unison.

"Distribute all of our remaining stores to the men. Give the deck a thorough cleaning before we depart," Tosa said.

"Yes, sir!" Samul and Torok descended to the storage areas below decks to begin the work of distributing supplies.

Tosa turned toward the other sailors lined up on the deck and said, "Throw down your weapons. We'll gather them and deliver them to the other ship as a sign of our willingness to cooperate."

The sailors all looked deeply confused, but they followed orders. They threw their weapons down on the deck; some sailors started gathering all of them into a pile. Jin and Yun threw down their weapons as well.

Chagum had Ruin dress in an officer's uniform like his own to help protect him somewhat from Sangal and Talsh's scrutiny. When he returned to the upper deck, he looked Tosa in the eyes.

Did you intend to do this from the start? Did you know we would be taken hostage?

Tosa must have realized that the only way to save Chagum's life and the lives of all the other men on board was to surrender. The Hunters were proficient killers even without weapons, but it would be difficult for them to assassinate Chagum while they were being watched by Sangalese guards.

Tosa had decided to sacrifice everything, even his own honor as New Yogo's Grand Admiral, to save Chagum's life.

Grandfather...

Chagum undid the belt that held his scabbard with trembling fingers. His sword fell to the ground. He joined hands with the two men on either side of him and started walking. When he passed by Tosa, he looked up.

Tosa smiled at him. Chagum bowed his head deeply, wanting to express his gratitude somehow.

Tosa's eyes widened slightly. The Crown Prince didn't have to bow his head to anyone but the Mikado. That gesture touched Tosa deeply. He watched Chagum as he walked over the temporary planking that allowed the sailors to cross over to Commander Olran's ship.

Goodbye, Chagum.

Tosa closed his eyes for a moment and prayed.

Ten no Kami, God of the Heavens, I ask you to protect my grandson. He must survive. I beg you.

Chagum had his daughter's eyes. Tosa kept looking at him until he was too far away to see.

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Everyone except Tosa passed over to Commander Olran's ship. The Sangalese sailors guarded their new prisoners vigilantly, looking for signs that any of the men would disobey or try to fight. But New Yogo's sailors put up no resistance. Their captors watched them carefully, but treated them fairly and without contempt.

When Tosa alone stood on the deck of New Yogo's flagship, Commander Olran called out, "Lord Harusuan, you too! Come over here!"

Tosa didn't move. Commander Olran narrowed his eyes and frowned as he noticed the black smoke billowing up from New Yogo's flagship.

Tosa stood up straight and tapped his fist to his chest. "I cannot allow this ship to fall into the hands of the enemy. Commander Olran, please order your ships to depart from this place immediately." Smoke swirled around Tosa, making him difficult to see. "I saturated the storage areas belowdecks with oil. Soon, the entire ship will go up in flames."

Commander Olran frowned. He opened his mouth to say something, then closed it. He shook his head sadly and turned away.

"Hoist the sails! Rowers, to your stations! We have to get away from here as fast as possible!" Sangalese sailors rushed to obey Commander Olran's orders. Wind filled the ship's sails as rowers dashed to their places. The rowers timed their strokes to take advantage of the wind. The ship turned sharply away from New Yogo's flagship and darted across the water.

Chagum was lined up with the other captive sailors on the deck of Commander Olran's ship. He stared at New Yogo's flagship in horror as black smoke belched from its hull and rose heavenwards. In a voice so loud it tore his throat, Chagum cried, "Admiral Harusuan!"

The sailors around him began shouting as well. "Admiral Harusuan! Admiral Harusuan!"

The figure of Tosa standing on the deck receded as Commander Olran's ship fled from the fire. Chagum leaned over the edge of the ship and kept calling out to his grandfather.

Flames licked at the sails of the flagship. The main mast collapsed and fell into the sea as it burned. Slowly, so slowly, the ship began to sink. Chagum watched the bubbles frothing around the prow and couldn't make himself look away.

Tosa was dead because of him. He hadn't even tried to save him. He couldn't do anything at all. Chagum collapsed to the deck and cried until he lost his voice.

Chapter 3 - The Prisoners at Night

Chagum and the other captive sailors were led into a small hut built in the Sangalese style, with a foundation built on poles. The walls, floor, and roof were made of dried palm leaves woven tightly together. There were many gaps in the weaving; some were large enough to act as small windows for the prisoners. Wind howled through every gap in the walls and roof.

The weather in Sangal was sticky and humid even at night, so the strong breeze was something of a relief. The wind was strong enough to shake the entire hut when it passed through. Some of the prisoners exchanged uncomfortable glances.

"This is a pretty shoddy place to keep prisoners, isn't it? If we all worked together, we could probably make it collapse in on itself," a middle-aged officer said. Some of the men surrounding him laughed.

"They know we won't run away. Where would we go? That's probably why they put us here."

Even if the prisoners managed to escape and steal a ship, the currents around Kalsh were so numerous and the dangers of the ocean were so varied that they wouldn't make it very far. It was likely that the rest of their fleet was already sailing home. It was foolish to think that the men from a single ship could fight their way past the entire navy of Sangal.

The men ate dinner from broad leaves that served as plates. No one spoke. Chicken and pork fried in oil and spiced with unfamiliar seasonings formed the base of the meal. A wide variety of tropical fruits and stewed vegetables were also brought into the hut on large trays. Such largesse was unexpected; the food was both plentiful and delicious.

"I'm not sure we'd be able to feed the sailors from Sangal as well as this if our positions were reversed," a man muttered.

"The Commander did promise that we'd be treated well."

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Chagum chose a place a little ways away from most of the sailors and sat down. Jin, Yun and Ruin sat in a loose semicircle facing him. Chagum was refusing to eat.

"Your Majesty, you must eat something," Jin whispered. "Even just a mouthful—please."

Chagum blinked at Jin. "Why are you suddenly so concerned about my health?" he asked sarcastically.

Jin's sharp eyes focused on Chagum. Chagum frowned at him. The Hunters were permitted to look upon the faces of the Mikado and his family, but the look Jin was giving him now was in no way reverential or respectful. He'd never looked at Chagum in this way.

"Forgive my directness, Your Majesty, but I thought you were made of stronger stuff than this. I've seen that strength in you many times," Jin whispered softly.

Chagum felt himself blush. He took a deep breath and smelled cooking spices and the faint tang of sea salt in the air. He could suddenly hear and see the people around him clearly; up until that moment, he felt like he'd been wandering in a nightmare.

The other sailors were still doing their best not to look directly at him. With his grandfather dead, Chagum was now responsible for the lives of all these men. Yet here he was, crying in a corner like a child. He'd barely even noticed all of these people trying to take care of him.
Chagum faced the sailors sitting at the long, low table in the center of the room. When the men noticed him looking at them, they stopped eating.

"Please, eat," Chagum said. His voice was hoarse. He spoke quietly so that the guards standing outside the hut wouldn't overhear him. "Right now, I'm the same as all of you. We're all prisoners. Please treat me just like you'd treat one of your own. I promise that I won't think that anything you say is rude or disrespectful."

The men at the table all looked down at the floor, then nodded deeply. Chagum's eyes passed quickly over each of their sunburned faces. Many of them were well past middle age, but there were several men in their thirties. Chagum didn't know how long they would all be prisoners together, but he suspected that Sangal would probably hold them for a long time. Months, at least.

Up until now, he'd barely given a thought to what these men must be experiencing. His chest constricted and his face flushed with shame. "Please forgive my earlier outburst," Chagum said. "None of you deserve what's happened here. I'm just happy we're all still alive. I'm proud of you all for making it this far. The only thing I want is for all of you to survive."

Some of the men at the table started crying. Their shoulders shook as they ducked their heads down. Admiral Tosa had sacrificed himself to save them. Chagum couldn't shy away from that fact, but he could at least encourage his grandfather's men to keep on living. Being the Crown Prince was good for that, if nothing else. When Chagum swallowed, something in the back of his throat tasted bitter.

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When night came, the guards outside the prisoners' hut distributed hammocks and soft pillows made of the fibers of the kol tree. All the lights were extinguished at sunset. The sounds of the wind and waves seemed louder in the dark.

Chagum couldn't sleep. He listened to the breathing of the men around him as the walls of the hut shook from the force of the wind. What should he do now? What could possibly be done?

At moonset, the wind started to die down. It was quiet and warm; the even breathing of the men sleeping around him was vaguely soothing. Chagum fell into a fitful doze.

Something pressed down hard over his nose and mouth. Chagum's eyes snapped open. It hurt to breathe. Someone was sitting on his chest, pinning him down as they covered his nose and mouth with their

hands. He struggled, but the person above him didn't shift. He couldn't move. His head felt like it was splitting apart. He couldn't *breathe...*

There was a loud sound like a thump. The weight on his chest vanished. He sucked in a deep breath and coughed violently.

"Are you all right, Your Majesty?" Jin whispered. He crouched down next to Chagum and pounded on his back to help him breathe better. The sailors near them woke up from the noise.

"It's fine, everyone," Jin whispered. "Just a cough. Go back to sleep."

The awakened sailors stretched out in their hammocks again. Jin rubbed Chagum's back until he stopped coughing.

As Chagum recovered, he noticed the shadow of someone else lying on the ground near his hammock. He leaned over to take a closer look and recognized Yun, who was clearly unconscious. Yun had just tried to kill him.

Chagum's shoulders shook. His teeth chattered from nerves.

"Your Majesty," Jin whispered in his ear. "As I'm sure you've guessed, the Mikado sent Yun and I to kill you. Yun takes those orders very seriously."

Chagum was sweating profusely. He turned toward Jin, trying to make out his face in the dark.

"Someone else begged me to protect you," Jin said quietly.

Chagum was still shaking. Jin removed something from his breast pocket and passed it to Chagum. When Chagum touched it, he knew who had begged Jin to protect him.

Shuga.

The object he was holding was a medallion called an alsam. Only Star Readers wore them. Chagum looked up at Jin and blinked. He didn't move in the slightest, but there was pain in his eyes. He'd defied the Mikado's orders—and the purpose of the Hunters' existence was to follow those orders. Why would Jin listen to a Star Reader like Shuga instead of the Mikado?

"I was ordered to defend the future Mikado," Jin whispered.

Chagum gripped the alsam in his hand tightly.

"Our country is at risk of being engulfed by a giant storm wave," Jin said. "In such situations, people preserve seeds to plant in the future, after the storm has passed. That's what he told me. I still remember."

Jin glanced down at the unconscious Yun. "Yun and I don't think the same way, obviously. But your benefactor foresaw that we would be captured."

Chagum looked up in surprise. "Really? How?"

"The Princess' letter was encouraging you to allow yourself to be captured and put up no resistance."

"Was that it? Was that what she was trying to say?" Chagum tried to remember the exact wording of Princess Saluna's letter. Shuga must have seen something in the letter that he'd overlooked. That day in the Sunrise Room when Shuga had hidden behind the Holy Sage, he hadn't intended to abandon Chagum at all. He'd retreated so that he could gain time to think and examine the letter. It was just like Shuga to see through everyone's plots like this—and to act to save Chagum's life, even if he couldn't do so directly.

Chagum bit his lip and looked down. His face felt hot.

Jin looked at him in silence for a while, then said in a severe tone, "Your Majesty, please listen. If we remain prisoners here, it is likely that we'll be led before Sangal's royal family. If that happens, you will certainly be recognized. You'll be used against our nation to make the Mikado capitulate to Sangal's demands. The one who gave me my orders begged only for me to preserve your life, but I cannot allow you to be used against our nation."

Chagum looked up at Jin and nodded deeply. He was happy that Shuga had worked so hard to save him, but he was still the Crown Prince of New Yogo. It was better for him to die than to be used by New Yogo's enemies.

"Then I should run, while they're still only guarding us lightly," Chagum said. "But could I even get away? Where could I go?"

"We have to get away," Jin said. "We'll steal a small boat, sneak aboard a Sangalese ship, then jump off on one of the islands. I have gemstones and money, enough to last for a long while. I've heard that

the people of Sangal are clever merchants—always willing to make a profit. There may be someone willing to risk taking us to safety, for the right pay. It’s a gamble, but... will you take it? Will you escape?"

Chagum nodded decisively.

Chapter 4 - Escape

The captive sailors gathered nervously around Chagum as he outlined his plan to escape. When he reached the part where he'd need to steal a ship, one of the sailors raised his hand.

"It seems that you'll need a few men who can operate a ship," he said. "Please allow me to accompany you, Your Majesty."

Several other sailors raised their hands and begged to be allowed to speak.

Chagum's face clouded over. "Wait. I appreciate the offer of help, but it will probably be difficult for anyone who isn't Sangalese to navigate in these waters. Besides, anyone caught escaping could be killed to serve as an example to the rest of us. I don't want anyone to sacrifice themselves for me."

The first man to volunteer to come with him shook his head. "I am unmarried. I have no other family. Please make use of me however you see fit, Your Majesty."

Another young man leaned forward. "I'm also single and have no family. I'm an advanced practitioner of rusagu, the traditional fighting style of our people. Ask anything of me, Your Majesty, and I will do it."

Chagum remained silent. He had no time to think things over. It was true that having skilled sailors and warriors along to handle the ship would be a huge help. He glanced over at Jin, who nodded at him.

"All right," Chagum said. "Then I'll ask both of you for your assistance. Please tell me your names."

"Tagal Tolkusu," the first man said.

"Oru Narouzu," the second man said.

Jin leaned in and whispered the the particulars of the plan to Tagal and Oru. The two men nodded in understanding. Jin and Oru got up and stood near the doorway of the hut. The other sailors were clearly

worried about Chagum's safety; they watched the movements of the would-be escapees very carefully.

"Your Majesty..." Ruin trailed off.

Chagum turned to face him and put a finger to his lips. "Don't worry," he whispered. "I'll make it out of here. Brave sailors survive a storm and live to see better weather. I swear I'll find some way to free you all. Until that time, do your best to survive."

Tears overflowed in Ruin's eyes. He looked down so that Chagum wouldn't see him crying.

Four sailors removed their belts and tied them together to create a long rope. These four stood between Jin and Oru.

Jin made eye contact with the sailors standing near the door and nodded.

"We have a sick man in here!" one of the sailors yelled. "Oi! He's really sick! We need water!"

The other sailors called out for water. The sound of their shouting was clearly audible on the other side of the door where their guards stood. As the sound of footsteps outside the door grew louder, Oru held up three fingers—there were three men outside the door.

"Wait," a Sangalese guard called out in halting Yogoese. "We will bring water. Step back."

The door opened, revealing two guards and a man carrying a large water jug. The moment the man carrying water entered the hut, Jin slipped out of the hut behind him. The guards noticed him immediately. Jin slammed the place below the first guard's ears with the blades of his hands, knocking him out instantly. The other guard unsheathed his sword and slashed at Jin; Jin dodged easily and brought his elbow sharply into the guard's solar plexus. He followed the blow with a solid strike to the guard's lower stomach. Both guards wore chest armor, but their stomachs were completely unprotected. In the space of two breaths, Jin had incapacitated both of them.

Oru knocked out the man who'd brought in the water jar. Tagal left the hut behind Jin, with Chagum following. Oru brought up the rear.

The sailors who had made the rope with their belts started tying up the guards. "The rest is up to you," one sailor said. "Good luck."

Jin and Tagal helped themselves to the swords the guards were carrying. Chagum also took a knife to help defend himself. It was Sangalese in style, so the grip felt a little strange.

There was a wide, sandy beach outside the hut. Jin gave the signal for Chagum and the others to hide beneath the hut, between the poles that supported its floor. Chagum crouched down under the hut.

A little ways away, there was a large grove of palm trees. Another hut stood inside the grove, watched over by another guard.

"Look," Jin whispered. "That's where the other guards are staying." Jin left Chagum, Oru and Tagal where they were and started scouting the beach for a boat to steal. Oru and Tagal knelt on the sand under the hut and didn't make a sound.

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Waiting for Jin to come back seemed to take a long time. Chagum kept worrying that Jin had gotten caught somehow, or worse. He crossed and uncrossed his legs several times, feeling the urgent need to move.

Chagum wondered when the changing of the guard was. He watched the other hut from the cover of the prison hut's foundation, waiting for the door to open. The night passed slowly. Oru didn't move at all; he was as still and silent as a statue. Tagal remained standing beneath the hut and stared into the darkness.

Near dawn, the dim outlines of the trees beyond the beach and the guardhouse became visible again. Oru's leg twitched. He pointed to a shadowy figure emerging from the trees.

It was Jin. He beckoned for them to come closer to him. Chagum, Oru and Tagal crawled out from under the prisoners' hut and sprinted toward Jin.

"There's a bay not far from here where some ships are docked," Jin whispered. "I found a fishing boat that we should be able to manage. Follow me."

Jin led them rapidly through the grove of pine trees behind the guardhouse. Just as they all broke into a run, someone inside the prisoners' hut screamed.

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The Yogoese sailors inside the prisoners' hut watched over their Sangalese guards in shifts. They had been bound and gagged just like Yun. By the time Yun regained consciousness, Chagum was already hiding beneath the hut. When he came to, he struggled to understand what was happening; he only knew that something about the current situation had changed.

As Yun listened to the whispers of the men around him, he realized that Chagum had escaped. Jin had betrayed him.

What the hell is he thinking?!

Rage burned in Yun's eyes. Jin had given into his emotions and defied the Mikado's orders. If Chagum fell into the King of Sangal's hands—or

the Emperor of Talsh's—he could be used as a powerful bargaining chip against New Yogo.

Jin, you're such an idiot.

Yun absolutely had to kill the Crown Prince. He struggled against the ropes binding his hands behind his back, but the more he struggled, the tighter the bonds became. Yun shifted impatiently toward the bound and gagged Sangalese guards sitting near him. He rubbed the edge of his gag against the metal fittings used to secure the chest armor of the closest guard. He was trying to get the fabric caught so that the fittings would pull it out. By slow degrees, the gag started to loosen; in less than a minute, Yun was able to spit the soaked cloth out of his mouth.

Yun took a deep breath and shouted at the top of his lungs: "The prisoners are escaping! They've killed the guards! They're getting away!"

Yun repeated this shout as loudly as he could before the surprised sailors surrounding him could gag him again.

The hut swayed in the wind. Two guards that had come to relieve the others slammed the door open. Their weapons were drawn. In the dim light of dawn, the footprints of Chagum, Jin, Oru and Tagal were faintly visible on the beach. The guards turned around and chased after the escaped prisoners.

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Chagum focused on nothing except running. Jin was out in front of him; Oru and Tagal were behind him. They'd been given Sangalese sandals as footwear when they'd been captured, but the shoes didn't fit very well. The material of their jackets tore as branched snagged at them. They shed both their jackets and their shoes as they ran.

The grove's palm trees started growing closer together. Tree roots grew thick and clustered on top of each other, forcing Jin and the others to slow down.

They crashed into a thicket of deep green nettles that were as sharp as tiny blades. Chagum shielded his face with his hands, gritted his

teeth and kept running. Jin drew his sword with his left hand and started hacking a clear path through the hazardous vegetation. Their pursuers were closing the distance; it wouldn’t be long before they caught up. Jin kept hacking through the nettles and underbrush at a frantic pace.

They ran for a long time before emerging from the woods onto a sandy beach. Small huts dotted the shore; fishermen were already casting their nets into the sea. Chagum saw a few fishermen sailing in boats just offshore.

"Tagal, Oru, run faster!" Jin shouted. "Take that boat, there!"
Tagal and Oru sprinted down the beach. Their faces were covered in sweat. They fumbled at their belts to free the weapons they’d taken from the guards.

"Your Majesty, follow them," Jin said. "I'll hold them off. Leave without me if I can't make it."

Armed Sangalese soldiers ran out of the trees above the beach. Jin faced them squarely and rushed to meet them.

Chagum kept running. Tagal and Oru scattered a group of terrified fishermen gathered on the beach and jumped onto an empty fishing boat. Chagum was right behind them. He cut the string that kept the sails from unfurling with his knife and prepared the boat to set sail based on what his grandfather had taught him. He'd never made such preparations before, so his hands were clumsy at it.

"Tagal! Oru! Push us out!"

Tagal and Oru gave the boat a solid shove into the ocean on either side, then clambered into the boat. The fishermen on the beach shouted angrily at them and picked up their harpoons. Several harpoons flew toward the boat from the direction of the beach. Chagum felt a rush of warm air on his right side and leaned backwards. A harpoon cut into his left shoulder, sending pain like burning through his entire body.

The tip of the harpoon cut completely through his shoulder and poked out on the other side. "Your Majesty!" Tagal cried out. He dropped to his knees at Chagum's side.

"I'm...fine," Chagum gritted out. "Sail...the ship."

Oru expertly adjusted the boat's sail as he dodged more flying harpoons.

The pain in Chagum's shoulder was too severe for him to ignore, but he tried to focus past the pain so that he could see what was going on.

Jin was still fighting on the beach. At least ten soldiers surrounded him, but he blocked all their strikes and kept them away from the other boats on the shore.

"Ah!" Chagum sucked in a painful breath. Some of the soldiers took up nets that the fishermen had left to dry in the sun the previous day. They cast the nets over Jin, but the nets were wide and large, so Jin managed to avoid getting caught.

Then a tall man who appeared to be the leader of the soldiers got behind Jin and cast a more targeted net over him from where he

couldn’t see or dodge it. Chagum saw Jin being overwhelmed by the soldiers, but he was too far away to make out what happened next.

The terrible pain of his wound made Chagum’s stomach turn over. He tried to swallow, but his throat was too dry. Every breath he took hurt. He broke into a cold sweat and tried not to pass out.

Chagum collapsed face-up on the deck with the sail directly above his head.

"Your Majesty! Crown Prince Chagum!" Tagal propped his head up so that the tip of the harpoon wouldn’t scrape across the deck. "What should we do? Where should we go?"

"Anywhere!" Chagum shouted. "Use the wind to get away from here, quickly! I can’t help you right now—just be careful. There are reefs, and the water’s shallow."

Tagal looked down at the harpoon in his shoulder. Even though the tip had completely passed through Chagum, there was very little blood. The wound would probably gush if Tagal tried to remove the harpoon. To make things worse, the tip of the harpoon was spiked with several sharp barbs. Pulling it out would injure Chagum even more.

Chagum’s eyes rolled back in his head; he was unconscious. Tagal kept supporting his head and shoulders. His face was sweaty and very pale.

"Oi," Oru called out, "there’s a ship over there! It’s headed right toward us on the starboard side!"

Tagal looked over his shoulder. A Sangalese ship of medium size was gliding across the water. The ship was so close that its shadow touched the edges of the fishing boat. Sangalese soldiers were lined up on the ship’s deck. The tips of their spears and shields glinted in the light of the rising sun.

"Huh? Why? How did they get here so fast?"

The soldiers they’d fled from initially were still on the beach, so far away they were scarcely visible. Where had this ship come from? How had they known to find them here?

Tagal and Oru exchanged glances. There was no hope of outpacing this ship; they were too close. They couldn’t fight their way past them,

either: the two of them couldn’t possibly win against a ship full of soldiers. Crown Prince Chagum was severely injured and needed immediate help.

The ship halted alongside the fishing boat and used long poles with grips on the end to pull the boat all the way in. Tagal and Oru could do nothing but sit and stare as the side of their boat contacted the Sangalese ship’s hull.

The soldiers and sailors standing on the deck were laughing and calling out to one another as if they didn’t have a care in the world. Even the older men looked as happy and excited as young children at a festival.

Oru frowned deeply. "These don’t look like any soldiers I’ve ever seen before," he muttered. The chest armor they wore was old and unpolished. They stood in relaxed poses and didn’t appear to want a fight.

Suddenly, the soldiers on the deck formed two lines, making a path for a young man standing behind them.

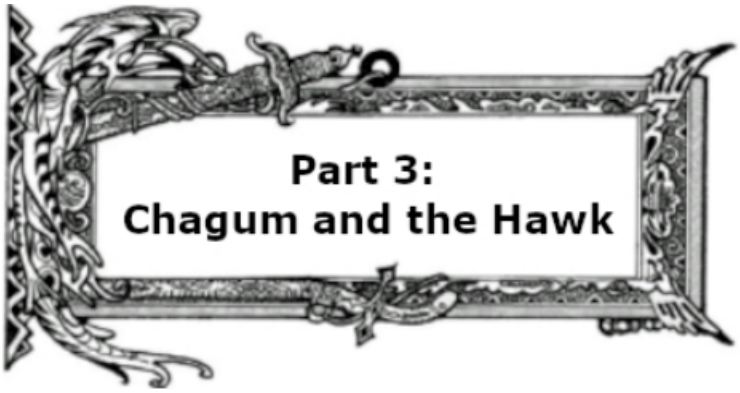
Tagal and Oru blinked in shock. They had never seen the man before, but they could tell at a glance that he was Yogoese. He carried a sword in his right hand. Suddenly, he leaped from the deck of the ship onto the fishing boat.

"It seems he’s alive," the man said as he stared down at Chagum.

Tagal frowned up at him. The man spoke Yogoese, but his accent was strange.

The man fixed Tagal with piercing eyes. "I’ll only save him if you go back and don’t fight. Understand?"

Chagum desperately needed medical treatment. Tagal and Oru nodded in agreement.



Part 3:
Chagum and the Hawk

Chapter 1 - Encounter

Chagum felt the pain of his injured shoulder in his bones.

A shark must have bitten me.

Chagum fought off sharks in his nightmares. Their teeth cut into his left shoulder and yanked him forward; pain wracked his entire body.

Save me! Please! Someone! Anyone!

When the pain finally receded to a dull throb, Chagum developed a high fever. The sharks in his nightmares were joined by flames that engulfed him on all sides, just like they'd engulfed New Yogo's flagship.

When Chagum regained consciousness, he was lying on the floor with a pillow under his head. Two men stood over him.

"Sure hope he hasn't got tetanus," one man muttered.

Chagum heard his voice clearly. Where was he? Was he dead?

"It's not tetanus; just a fever," the other man said. "It's surprising that he's held on so long. Fevers this bad can kill people."

Chagum felt rough fingers against his forehead and opened his eyes with great effort. The hand against his forehead felt wonderfully cold.

"I wish the fever would go down more." The man was frowning at him.

"It's not a fever," Chagum whispered hoarsely. "It's a fire. It's so hot. And it's still burning." Chagum couldn't think of anything except the heat. He was unconscious again the moment he closed his eyes.

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Chagum didn't know how long he slept. Nightmares chased him inside his mind for days on end. When he opened his eyes, he felt a faint breeze on his forehead. It was quiet all around. Chagum heard boards creaking and sails flapping, but nothing else.

He remembered passing out and waking up several times. He shifted to take in more of his surroundings and realized that it was getting dark. He could see the sun dipping below the horizon through a small porthole. There was a temporary wall at his back made of slatted wood and rope.

Chagum had no idea where he was. His left shoulder throbbed. He brought his right hand up to touch it and suddenly remembered how he'd injured it.

We were escaping. A harpoon went through my shoulder; I passed out, and then—then, what? Where am I?

This place didn't look like the inside of the fishing boat that he, Tagal and Oru had stolen. Whatever ship he was on now was definitely bigger than that one. As he turned his head to look around the room, he saw a man kneeling in the corner near the door.

Chagum's heart beat faster. The man's face was hidden in the shadows, but Chagum could clearly see his eyes staring fixedly at him. Chagum suspected the man was a warrior. He appeared Yogoese, but his clothing was foreign and strange.

The wind picked up suddenly and the waves became choppier; Chagum felt his back rise and fall. A shaft of red-gold sunlight fell across the man's face. His eyes and hair were black. The sharpness of his features reminded Chagum of a knife.

"Are you awake, Your Majesty?" the man asked. His Yogoese was flawless.

Chagum frowned at him. "Who are you? Why am I here?"

"My name is Hugo Arayutan," he said quietly. "This is a Sangalese merchant vessel, though it's probably more accurate to call it a pirate ship with a veneer of respectability. No one here intends to harm you. Please ease your mind, Crown Prince Chagum."

Chagum's eyes widened. This man knew who he was. Anxiety made the muscles of his chest tighten. Some of the confusion and mental fog caused by his fever lifted as he took in the man's explanation. He was on a pirate ship? He didn't remember boarding a pirate ship. What had happened to the fishing boat?

Chagum looked at Hugo. Maybe he knew that Chagum was the Crown Prince because he was Yogoese; it was possible that he'd seen Chagum before.

"But who are you?" Chagum insisted. "You seem Yogoese, and yet… not."

Hugo smiled at him. "You're absolutely right, Your Majesty. In the language of the Talsh people, I am a tolan. That means I am a military officer with three hundred men under my command."

Chagum held his breath. All the blood drained from his face. Hugo was a Talsh officer. How had this happened? His thoughts were still jumbled, but he understood immediately what he had to do.

Chagum forced his expression blank and asked, "Where are Tagal and Oru? Are they safe?"

Hugo blinked in surprise. The question was clearly unexpected. "Yes, they're safe. When you boarded this ship, you were near the island of Aju. We docked there and delivered them to the Sangalese army. They won't be killed; don't worry. They're still valuable hostages. The royal family of Sangal has commanded that all Yogoese prisoners must be treated well."

Chagum remembered Princess Saluna's letter and felt a bit calmer. He was fairly sure that Hugo was telling the truth. He smiled slightly. Tagal and Oru were alive.

Hugo frowned. Chagum's expression was difficult to interpret. He still looked more like a boy than an adult, but there was a world-weary sadness in his eyes. He was able to hold Hugo's gaze without looking away.

Goosebumps rose on the nape of Hugo's neck. The light in Chagum's eyes was like a challenge.

Shit!

Hugo dashed to Chagum's side and forced his mouth open to prevent him from biting out his tongue. Chagum groaned and bit down on his fingers. Hugo pinned him down to prevent him from moving; Chagum struggled but couldn't break free. He summoned all his strength and twisted away from Hugo.

Hugo’s grip loosened, but he didn’t let go. When Chagum tried to free himself again, Hugo struck Chagum on the side of the head with his open palm.

The strike hurt so badly that Chagum’s heart faltered. His vision went dim. Hugo forced his mouth open again and forced in something that smelled like blood and metal; Chagum nearly gagged.

"Sodok! Come here!"

An older man came through the door.

"Put him to sleep," Hugo commanded.

Sodok soaked the corner of a clean cloth in liquid he kept at a pouch at his belt. He brought the cloth over Chagum’s nose and mouth. Chagum collapsed almost immediately, like a puppet with its strings cut.

Hugo removed the hilt of his dagger from Chagum’s mouth.

"What happened?" Sodok asked.

Hugo sighed and stood up. He wiped his hands on his pants. "He tried to bite out his tongue."

"He what?"

"He asked about his men," Hugo said. "After he learned they were safe, he tried to kill himself. He’d rather be dead than fall into Talsh hands." Hugo looked down at Chagum with a complicated expression.

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The sleeping drug didn’t wear off until well past midnight. When Chagum awoke, his tongue was tied down by a cloth gag that wrapped all the way around his head. The gag made it difficult to breathe; it was also completely soaked with his spit.

His hands were bound firmly in front of him. Chagum groaned and tried to sit up. Someone’s hand pushed his forehead down.

"Forgive me, Your Majesty," Hugo said. "If you swear to me that you won’t bite out your tongue, I’ll remove the gag."

The room was lit by several lamps, so Hugo's face was faintly visible. Chagum put all of his rage into the glare he gave Hugo.

"Your anger is understandable," Hugo said. "Before you rush to any conclusions, I would like you to hear me out, Your Majesty." He sounded completely calm. His hand smelled like sea salt and choru; he must be a smoker.

Chagum relaxed incrementally. There were a lot of ways to die, after all, and the gag was unbearably uncomfortable. He looked up at Hugo and nodded.

Hugo quickly untied the gag and ripped it out. After setting it aside, he worked on freeing Chagum's hands.

Chagum sucked in air like someone drowning.

"You might be thinking that death will save you from being used as a hostage," Hugo said quietly. "But the situation is a bit more complicated than that."

Chagum remained silent. Hugo smiled at him. "It may not seem like it, but this encounter is beneficial for both of us, Your Majesty. If you do

as I ask, I can give you something you want."

Chagum frowned. Something about Hugo's voice irritated him. "Just get to the point already."

Hugo's smile vanished instantly. "I'll be brief. The reason for your capture is simple. The Talsh empire intends to make you the next Mikado of New Yogo."

That wasn't simple at all. That was inconceivable. Chagum stared straight at Hugo and didn't move. When Hugo noticed the blood draining from his face, he said, "I can understand why you doubt my motives, but—"

"Stop," Chagum interrupted him. "I don't need any nation's help to become the next Mikado," he said angrily, glaring daggers at Hugo.

Hugo held his stare, then spread his knees slightly and brought his forehead to the floor. "I beg your forgiveness, Your Majesty," Hugo said. He took a deep breath and lifted his head. "There are implications to the Talsh empire wishing for you to become the next Mikado that may not be immediately apparent. Please listen to what I have to say."

He paused. "First, I am curious: how much do you know about the Talsh empire?"

Chagum didn't answer, and Hugo didn't pause for his reply; he kept speaking in a calm and even tone.

"I am a spy for the Talsh empire. My rank is called 'taku,' which means 'hawk.' I've investigated New Yogo's military forces for many years. You may already know this, Your Majesty, but New Yogo's combined forces amount to roughly thirty thousand men. The Talsh are prepared to commit two hundred thousand men to invade New Yogo. Even after the war with Sangal, the Talsh navy has more than a thousand ships at its disposal for both trade and warfare."

Chagum's expression didn't shift, but he felt genuine fear in the pit of his stomach. A thousand ships! New Yogo's entire navy, including ships used only for trade, had only a hundred. If Hugo's words were true, then New Yogo was no more than a flea on the leg of the giant that was the Talsh empire.

Chagum suddenly remembered what Commander Olran had said to his grandfather: *Have you ever seen the Talsh navy, Lord Harusuan? Their ships fly black sails. When they gather and sail together, they appear as a giant stormcloud floating over the ocean. No matter how many of their ships we sank, they just kept coming. Then their true warships came, larger and stronger than the others—and there was no end to them, either.*

Chagum closed his eyes. Hugo wanted him to give in to despair.

"What do you think, Your Majesty?" Hugo asked. "Everything I've told you is true."

Behind his closed eyelids, Chagum imagined the land surrounding Kosenkyo burning. He composed himself with great effort. Hugo was trying to manipulate him, but he refused to be moved. What purpose did making Chagum lose hope serve? What was Hugo trying to achieve?

Hugo kept speaking. "Are you thinking about what will happen when the Talsh come to destroy your country? They'll defeat you easily. Imagine the sound of their footsteps marching closer to your home. Think of Kosenkyo and your palace sacked and in flames."

Hugo paused, then said, "I don't need to imagine it. I remember the fire staining the sky red and making the air so thick with smoke that people choked to death. I remember soldiers fleeing the capital, leaving the city undefended as the Talsh marched through the main gate in time to their massive war drums. The drums were louder than the roar of the sea in a storm."

Chagum's eyes widened slightly in surprise. Hugo was still speaking dispassionately, but he was sweating. "I… I still dream about it. All of it. I come from Yogo, which the Talsh empire subjugated and destroyed."

Hugo was from Yogo. Chagum looked at him with new eyes. He came from the southern continent, where Chagum's ancestors had come from. The reason his voice sounded slightly strange was that he had an accent.

Chagum felt like someone had just lifted the lid of a treasure box to reveal the contents inside. Hugo had probably been a child when Yogo

was destroyed. Why would he become a Talsh soldier after living through such a terrible experience?

Hugo rubbed his chin and lapsed into silence. When he spoke again, his voice was louder and his accent was suppressed to the point that Chagum could barely hear it. "There were countless casualties in Yogo's war against the Talsh, but they didn't simply kill the people and burn the cities. They destroyed our way of life.

"Crown Prince Chagum, I know better than most how the Talsh empire conquers a nation. If you want to save New Yogo from suffering the same fate, you only have one option."

Chagum's heart beat faster. He clenched his fists. The movement sent shooting pain up his left arm, but he barely noticed. Shuga had taught him to never expose his true thoughts to an enemy. But he couldn't just hide behind his politician's mask and pretend that what Hugo said had no effect on him. He had to ask.

"And what's that, exactly?"

Hugo smiled at him in relief. "I think you already know, Your Majesty. I must ask again for your forgiveness. I've said too a little too much, I think. Let's leave the conversation here for tonight. We can speak again in the morning."

Hugo got up and retrieved a stoppered jar from a box in the corner of the room. He removed the stopper from the jar and passed it to Chagum.

"This is a strong medicine that will help heal your wound. Please take only a single sip, or you'll be sleeping for a long time."

Chagum hesitated for a moment, but his throat was parched and he was desperate for any liquid. He took a sip of the medicine and swallowed almost without thinking. The jar felt cool in his overheated hands. The liquid smelled like unfamiliar herbs, but it had no taste. Chagum handed the jar back to Hugo.

"Is there anything you need before I leave, Your Majesty?"

Chagum shook his head. He'd sweated so much that he didn't need to pee, and he was no longer thirsty.

Hugo nodded and stood up again. "Good night. I'll be in the next room. Knock on the wall if you need anything, Your Majesty." He blew out the candles that were lighting the room, then left.

Chagum was alone. The sound of the waves echoed all around him. He was completely exhausted. There was a tingling sensation behind his eyes. When he closed them, he fell asleep immediately.

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Hugo smoked choru on the upper deck of the ship while looking up at a sky full of stars. He saw a tiny pinprick of light on the other side of the deck. A middle-aged man with a slight build approached Hugo from that direction. He was a magic weaver who had worked with Hugo for many years. His name was Sodok Yatonoi; he was the younger brother of Rasugu Yatonoi, the magic weaver that had infiltrated Sangal before the Talsh invasion. Rasugu had plotted the successful downfall of Sangal's royal family.

"We'll probably reach Ashan in three days," Sodok said. "Ashan sells toro. I wonder if I should send some to my brother."

"I don't want Rasugu to know about this yet."

Sodok frowned at Hugo with a doubtful expression. "Do you distrust my brother? Do you think to disparage his achievements by

withholding information?"

Sodok felt no actual affection for his brother, but Rasugu was a magic weaver with a reputation for intelligence and tenacity. That reputation may have been more important to Sodok than the man himself. The successful capture of Crown Prince Chagum could not have been achieved without his information. He wouldn't have fallen into Sangal's trap so easily if Rasugu hadn't used his knowledge of the Crown Prince's friendship with Princess Saluna of Sangal.

Hugo wasn't the slightest bit concerned about Sodok's insinuations. He exhaled slowly, breathing out smoke.

Sodok spoke softly so that he wouldn't be overheard by the Sangalese sailors on the deck. "Or do you think Crown Prince Chagum would be too tempting a prize? Do you fear he'll be snatched from you?"

"No. Don't needle me with your ridiculous ideas and accusations. It was hard to get this far, and there is a plan, if you remember. All I need is a little more time."

Sodok shrugged. "Fine. There's no such thing as being too careful." He spun on his heel and was about to return to his cabin when Hugo called him back.

"Sodok, you might want to make yourself scarce. You and Rasugu look alike, don't you? We don't want our new friend to notice the, um, family resemblance."

Sodok didn't turn around, but he waved in acknowledgement of Hugo's advice. Then he descended the stairs that led to the ship's cabins.

Hugo remained on the deck. He didn't understand what he was feeling. He extinguished his pipe and stashed his remaining choru in his pocket. Then he paced back and forth across the deck.

Sailors stood at the ship's helm and all along its rigging. Many of them were talking among themselves or nudging their companions to help stay awake.

"You going to bed, sir?" a sailor asked him as he passed.

"Yeah," Hugo said. "No falling asleep at the wheel, all right? And no drinking, either. I'll tell the captain."

The sailor laughed hugely and slapped his knees. "Everyone knows a bottle of something helps you sleep, sir. Just one bottle, though."

The sailor was still quite young; perhaps younger than Crown Prince Chagum.

"If you sold that kid to the right person, you'd be rich, sir," the sailor said.

Hugo smiled bitterly. "You have no idea. Selling someone like him would make everyone on this ship filthy rich. You could buy three wives."

The sailor howled with laughter again. "I don't need three," he said. "Don't you know how scary Sangalese women are?"

Hugo's smile deepened. "Isn't that because they have to support you as well as themselves? I've never met a sailor with savings."

"Eh, maybe. But you're not married, are you, sir? I think I like this better. It's fun and exciting. I'd never even seen a noble from New Yogo until today."

Hugo clapped the man on his shoulder, then retired to his cabin. He envied the carefree life of the young sailor. Hugo's family had been pirates since before Sangal was founded. If his family had lived, he might have continued in the family business, but the Talsh had destroyed any possibility of that. Hugo liked to think that he kept the spirit of his family's livelihood going, even if they were gone.

He remembered fleeing a burning city as an orphan and returning to it as street urchin desperate to survive. Common people suffered the most in times of war, but they always managed to scrape by somehow. Hugo remembered long stretches of time where his only goal was to live to see another sunrise. That desperation reminded him of Crown Prince Chagum staring stoically at him as fear made his shoulders go rigid.

The night air was humid and sticky; fortunately, Hugo's cabin was small and well-ventilated. He threw off his shirt and stretched out on the floor. He was tired, but he couldn't fall asleep. He stayed up all night staring at the sea through the porthole of his cabin.

Chapter 2 - Washing Up

Chagum slept for over half a day.

When he awoke, all he did was eat and relieve himself before he passed out again. Two full days passed this way. When he woke up clear-headed sometime on the third day, he was urgently hungry.

Chagum's fever broke during his long sleep. He ate with the appetite of someone starving, devouring his breakfast of spiced meat and vegetables almost without chewing. He ate all the fruit on his plate as well, even though it was wrinkled and shriveled from long storage.

Later that morning, a scorched smell coming from the deck made Chagum's nose twitch. He wiped the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve. Eating such a full meal made him feel tired again, but what he wanted most now was a bath, not more sleep. He didn't even know if that was possible here, but maybe he'd be allowed to go swimming or something. He was uncomfortable making such a request, so he sat near the porthole in his cabin and prayed for a cool breeze.

Chagum could hear many voices through the wall; some were clear enough for him to understand. It was hot, so the door of his cabin as open slightly to circulate the air. He could see the steps leading up to the deck.

Footsteps were audible outside his cabin. Hugo appeared on the stairs carrying a large metal basin. A set of clean clothes was folded underneath the basin. He entered Chagum's cabin, put the basin on the floor, and knelt down.

"I thought the heat might be uncomfortable, Your Majesty," Hugo said. "Would you like to bathe?"

The muscles of Chagum's back went rigid. The vagueness of Hugo's question implied that he was offering to bathe Chagum, which was both embarrassing and unnecessary. "I can bathe myself. Just leave the water, a towel and the clothes."

"Very well."

Chagum started removing his sweat-soaked shirt. When he twisted to remove his right arm from his sleeve, his left shoulder burned with pain. He gasped and tried to shrug out of his shirt, but both of his arms were stuck.

Hugo observed this struggle silently for a few seconds, then extended his hand to help pull the fabric away from Chagum's injured shoulder.

"Don't touch me!" The force of his own shout surprised Chagum. He ignored the pain of his injury by focusing on the cresting wave of his rage. He flinched, stared down at the floor, and yanked the shirt over his shoulders with a wince.

"I'll go outside. Call when you're done," Hugo said quietly. He got up, bowed, and turned toward the door.

There was a young woman standing in the doorway. "Do you have enough towels?" she asked. "I wasn't sure, so I brought extra."

"I thought I told you not to come in here, Senna," Hugo said. He sounded genuinely angry for all that his voice was so quiet. He seized her arm to prevent her from entering the room.

Senna's mouth snapped shut. She looked down at Hugo's hand and frowned.

"I've ordered my people to stay away, but this is *my* ship. I can go wherever I want on my own ship," she said in clipped, precise Sangalese. "If you don't like that, you're free to leave. Take your Yogoese noble and get off at the next port. I don't need money so badly that I'll tolerate disrespect."

Hugo stared at her in silence, then frowned. He faced Chagum again. "This is the ship's captain, Senna," he said.

She didn't know that Chagum was the Crown Prince of New Yogo. It seemed that no one but Hugo did. Chagum had to be careful here; if he spoke carelessly, he might give something away.

Hugo's eyes flicked hesitantly between Senna and Chagum, but he finally let go of Senna's arm and stepped out of her way. "Fine. Go in."

Senna gave him a nod of approval. "I'll respect you and your masters as long as you respect me. We have an agreement, after all." Her voice sounded completely different when she wasn't angry.

"Understood," Hugo said. "I swear I won't interfere with your rights or your role on this ship." He passed through the door next to her, then turned around again to give her a warning: "This is a very important person. Please don't offend him."

Senna's eyebrows rose slightly. When she looked up at Hugo, she appeared genuinely curious. She stilled her expression to seriousness, then faced Chagum.

"It's nice to meet you," she said. "I'm Senna, this ship's Tsuara Kashina."

"Tsuara Kashina?" Chagum asked.

Senna shrugged and said, "The soul of the ship," in exaggeratedly slow Yogoese.

Chagum nodded in understanding. The words were a title, not a name.

Hugo glanced between Senna and Chagum with interest as he leaned against the doorframe. Senna was staring at Chagum as if she were attempting to estimate his worth. Chagum submitted to this scrutiny, remaining still and unresponsive.

Something about Chagum made Senna smile. "You're hurt that badly and you still intend to bathe yourself? Are you sure you don't need help?"

Chagum nodded. "I can do it. I don't need any help."

Senna knelt down next to the basin of water. "You can't wring the towel one-handed. Let me help. That's all I'll do." She took a dry towel, dipped it in the basin to soak it, then wrung it out and handed it to Chagum.

Chagum accepted the towel and started wiping himself down. The cool cloth cleaned the sweat and salt from his skin. It was a relief to finally be clean—cleaner, anyway.

Senna sat across from him and said nothing. She dipped the cloth in the water and wrung it out for him, but did nothing else. The cabin was eerily quiet. Chagum didn't even hear anyone else moving on the ship.

Hugo stood leaning against the doorframe and frowned slightly. Chagum's behavior was unexpected. He moved slowly so that he

wouldn’t aggravate his injuries, but all of his movements were precise and efficient. Hugo had expected Chagum to ask Senna to bathe him, since performing such a mundane task was unbecoming of his status.

When Chagum noticed Hugo, he asked, "Are you still here? Do you need something?"

"No. I’m sorry that I can only provide salt water at this time. We’ll be stopping at a harbor tomorrow, so I can bring you fresh water for bathing then."

Chagum pulled on the clean shirt, feeling much better than he had when he’d first woken up.

Senna gathered up the basin and his soiled shirt, then stood up. She side-stepped Hugo and left the room.

"Pardon the rudeness of this request, but I’m going to have to ask that you remain in this cabin while we’re in the harbor, Your Majesty. As soon as we’re on the open sea again, you’ll be free to walk around the ship as you wish. It’s only going to get warmer as we go south. We have a long journey ahead of us."

Chagum stared up at Hugo without saying a word.

"You've likely guessed this already, but the Sangalese pirates on this ship have no idea who you are. They believe you to be a noble from New Yogo, but do not know your rank. Please go along with this story. It's for your own protection, Your Majesty." He turned to leave.

"How long have I been on this ship?" Chagum asked.

Hugo turned to face him slowly. "About two months, Your Majesty."

Chagum's eyes widened slightly. It had been more than two months since the Mikado had cast him out of the imperial palace. Why had Hugo taken him? Why was he on a pirate ship? How had he known that Chagum would try to escape captivity on that beach in Sangal?

The white light of the sun passed over Hugo's face. He was smiling in a vaguely self-satisfied way. "I am called a hawk in the language of the Talsh. That means I'm a spy. Part of my work is to pass secret messages back to the Talsh empire. Sometimes, I intercept communications from other nations."

Hugo spun on his heel and left without saying another word.

Chagum broke into a cold sweat. Hugo must have read Princess Saluna's letter. He'd known about the trap set for the Yogoese navy at Kalsh. He'd known that Chagum would be there, and when. But how? Everything would have had to work out perfectly in order for his plan to work. If Chagum had reacted differently to the letter, he never would have sailed to Sangal.

Chagum thought that Hugo must be willing to risk everything in order to win. How had he understood the Mikado's motives and potential actions so well? How long had he spied on New Yogo? Months? Years?

The subject of Chagum and the Mikado's contention was common knowledge; most people in New Yogo also knew that Admiral Harusuan supported Chagum over the Mikado.

Chagum's heard beat loudly in his ears. He'd been fully aware of the dissension in New Yogo before he'd left, but he never expected the Talsh to know so much about New Yogo's internal struggles. He felt like the Talsh had already devoured New Yogo even though the war hadn't really started yet. A chill went up his spine.

Shuga...

Chagum removed the alsam medal from his belt pouch and gripped it tightly. This entire situation was hopeless. He couldn't see a way past it. He was all alone here.

Chagum heard people moving on the ship through his back, which was still pressed to the wall of his cabin. A shaft of sunlight shone across the floor.

What had happened to Jin? He'd seen the soldiers cast nets over him, but what about after that? He hoped Jin was still alive, but he suspected that he was dead.

Chagum started shaking. Jin had fought so hard so that he could get away. When he thought about it, Chagum realized that he was always being protected by someone.

Tosa's face rose up in his mind's eye. He'd smiled at Chagum and said, "You must survive. No matter what. Promise me."

Chagum closed his eyes. So many people had risked or given their lives to defend him. He was only alive now because of their sacrifices. Why had so many people given so much for his sake? Compared to all of them, he was still a useless child. He wasn't strong enough or capable enough to imitate any of them.

Chagum bit down on his trembling lip and turned to look out at the sea through the cabin's small porthole. It would be so much easier to jump into the ocean and let the waves swallow him up. If he was dead, he couldn't be responsible for anything that happened after. He'd be free of all his terrible burdens.

Chagum took shallow breaths in an effort to hold back his tears. He refused to waste the sacrifices of all the people who had worked so hard just so that he could survive. It was shameful to even consider such a thing.

Chapter 3 - Stars in a Strange Sky

The sailors on the deck above Chagum made a lot of noise as the ship entered the harbor. He heard many people calling out to one another and talking in low voices. The door to the cabin and the board over his porthole were both closed and locked so that no one would discover him, making his cabin unbearably hot.

The ship was probably taking on cargo. He heard footsteps outside his door and the sounds of heavy objects hitting the hull. Sea birds flew above the ship; he could hear their cries clearly.

After the din above Chagum's head quieted somewhat, Senna knocked on his door.

"It must be so hot," she said. She pulled the door open, but she didn't come in. She stood on the steps above his door; he could see nothing of her except her bare feet.

Chagum took a deep breath. In addition to the usual smell of salt in the air, he identified something sweet, like perfume. The ship rocked gently back and forth.

Senna's feet moved suddenly, drawing his gaze. A tiny white mouse scurried around her ankles. The mouse climbed up her right shin. When she twitched her right knee, the mouse leaped over to her left leg, then shimmied down her shin to the floor. When the mouse climbed up her right shin again, Senna repeated her movements. The mouse jumped playfully across the gap between her legs as if it was playing some kind of game.

"That's a well-trained mouse," Chagum said.

Senna laughed. "Poi, go say hi."

The mouse rushed down the stairs and paused outside Chagum's door. The mouse approached slowly, maintaining a slight distance. The mouse bowed its head to Chagum, then turned around and went back to Senna.

Chagum smiled without realizing it. He watched Senna feed the mouse something from her hand. Seeing her like this, it was hard to think of Senna as the captain of a pirate ship.

"What is a Tsuara Kashina, exactly?" he asked in Sangalese. "You seem awfully young to be the captain of a ship."

Senna opened the door to his room fully and poked her head in. "Since when do you speak Sangalese?"

Chagum smiled. "Well, I guess I can speak it a little. I learned it a long time ago." He chose to speak simply and informally.

Senna looked a little more at ease as she said, "Tsuara Kashina are born on the island of Amarai. I'm not sure if there's a reason for that, but it's always been that way."

Senna licked her dry lips and continued, "When a woman from Amarai is with child, she is watchful for sudden fortunate events—bringing in a huge catch of fish, say, or acquiring a vast hoard of treasure. Such signs of good fortune are credited to the child, who is called the Yaltash Ku Ra, the blessed child of the sea. Such children cannot be raised on the islands, or their blessings will never benefit anyone. Tsuara Kashina bring their ships good fortune whenever they set sail. I've been on board one ship or another ever since I was old enough to walk. When I got old enough to give commands during raids, I was made the captain of this ship."

Chagum looked at Senna with genuine interest. "So you're lucky or blessed in some way? People believe that you bring them good luck?"

"They don't just believe it," Senna said nonchalantly, "they know it. It's true." Her voice was firm. "Yaltash Ku Ra truly are blessed by the sea. No matter what misfortune may befall, the blessing I've received will act against it. I was born to help keep my friends and allies safe from all the dangers of the sea."

Chagum tilted his head a little. "That sounds...incredibly difficult."

Senna's eyebrows rose. "Difficult? Why?"

Chagum frowned. "Isn't it hard, having everyone depend on you like that?"

Senna blinked. "Well, there are some parts of it that I don't like. My home is currently occupied by the Talsh empire. My ancestors were all pirates, but piracy is illegal in Talsh. After a while, they caught me. They probably would have killed me if I wasn't so lucky." She frowned. "And it's not just the ship that depends on me. My home island does, too. I can't say that's not a little troublesome from time to time."

Senna's frown vanished. Her eyes sparkled. "But whenever my friends and I narrowly escape danger and I see the relief on everyone's faces, I'm proud. Even now, whenever I feel lonely or troubled, I remember how much money we'll be getting at the end of this job. It eases my mind. Even the younger men on board will be able to get married if they want to."

Chagum was shocked that she would reveal so much in such a casual tone. Was it really appropriate to talk about how much she would be paid for abducting him to his face?

"Are you ever worried that someone else's bad luck will outweigh your good luck?" he asked.

Senna frowned at him. She looked surprised.

"Wasn't your home taken over by the Talsh? You've become their tool, used to get information—and hostages. I know they pay you for it, but doesn't this situation strike you as unfortunate? Do you feel nothing about the hostages you take or the lives you destroy to do this work?"

Senna shook her head. "Nope." She paused. "Sorry, but in this world, you either eat or get eaten. Should I feel sorry for the fish I stab with my harpoon before I eat them?"

"People aren't fish, you inconsiderate moron!" Chagum shouted, suddenly enraged.

"How are they different?" Senna shouted back. "They're both living things. A person run through with a harpoon will die the same as any fish. Unless they get away and escape, they're caught."

"And what about your people? Haven't they been caught by the Talsh empire?" Chagum glared at Senna, letting his rage show plainly on his face.

She laughed at him. "I guess so. Talsh is huge, so they swallowed us up. It was inevitable."

"I see," Chagum said. "So because the Talsh beat you fair and square, you do whatever they say without question?"

Senna stood up straight and shook her head emphatically. "I know I said I'm working for them now, but that's not something I usually do. And I don't obey all their orders. You're wrong."

Chagum felt vaguely nauseated. "I doubt I'm wrong. You've got a Talsh spy ordering you around."

Senna's face turned bright red. "So what? We're just making money here. We don't like or take orders from the Talsh."

"Yes, you do. Money's just your excuse."

"It's not an excuse!"

Chagum stared straight at Senna and said quietly, "So if I promise to pay you more money than Hugo's offering you, you'll let me escape?"

Senna's face went slack with shock. "Aside from money, there are three things my people value: courage, repaying debts, and keeping promises." Her expression hardened into something cold and forbidding. "I made a promise to Hugo, and I won't break it." She turned her back to Chagum and left the cabin, slamming the door shut behind her.

Even with Senna gone, Chagum's anger lingered. *It must be nice to live by such a simple and idiotic code*, he thought. Yelling at Senna hadn't made him feel any better, though. When his rage dissipated, he felt strangely empty. Venting his frustrations on Senna wouldn't do anything to help him escape. She'd never understand his point of view now that he'd yelled at her.

Chagum shook his head. *Her way of thinking may be simplistic, but I highly doubt she's stupid.*

Sitting alone in his dark, stuffy cabin, Chagum thought about what he could do to improve his situation. He should use the time until his injury healed to healed to create an escape plan.

Even if he managed to escape this ship successfully, he had no idea where he was. He saw Hugo's sharp, determined eyes clearly in his

imagination. Hugo was utterly strange to him. He didn't understand his motives at all, but he also didn't think he was evil. He'd schemed and plotted to take Chagum, but he'd also been unexpectedly honest about all of his actions and decisions. He said he was a Talsh spy, but Chagum got the impression that he wasn't the sort of person to shut up and follow orders. He hadn't even gloated about the success of his plan so far—on the contrary, he'd been excessively courteous, considering the circumstances.

Hugo was Yogoese, but he displayed none of the nervousness that Chagum was used to seeing when common people addressed members of the Mikado's family. He wasn't afraid to look Chagum in the eyes. He didn't seem like a noble or a courtier, though. He claimed to be a soldier as well as a spy, but he didn't seem proud of that fact. Aside from Senna, Hugo was the only person he'd talked to on this long voyage; Hugo seemed to be the only person who was actively guarding him.

Chagum didn't know if there were any other Talsh soldiers on the ship, but he'd seen and heard no sign of them. He guessed that Hugo was the only one on board. If he assumed there were no other Talsh soldiers here, then there must be a reason. Why did Hugo think it was safer to confine him and keep his existence secret rather than having a ship full of soldiers watch over him?

This is getting me nowhere. I don't understand what Hugo's trying to do.

Hugo had told him that he only had one option to save New Yogo from being destroyed by the Talsh, but he didn't understand what that meant, either.

Chagum sat and sweated and worried for hours, but he didn't find any answers, just more questions. What was expected of him here? More importantly, what could he do?

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When the ship left the harbor, the sun was about to go down. They weren't even staying for a day, which was a very short rest for the crew,

but the day had felt long to Chagum. The pirates complained loudly about not being able to remain in the harbor overnight.

Hugo seemed afraid of Chagum's existence being leaked to the people in the harbor town. He pacified the grumbling sailors by paying them each a bit of extra money. Since Hugo was a spy of the Talsh empire, their ship wasn't inspected when they docked, but Hugo's status might not protect the ship as it moved further south. Any harbor they stopped at after this would probably be swarming with Talsh soldiers.

The sailors had dinner as soon as the ship pushed out to sea. It seemed like it would be another ordinary night. Everyone went to bed after dinner aside from the sailors on duty.

When the ship was silent above him, Chagum stood up. He stumbled a little from light-headedness and leaned against the wall. His left shoulder still hurt when he moved it, but after his initial disorientation passed, he felt relatively steady on his feet. He pushed himself off the wall, opened his door and left the cabin.

Chagum climbed the narrow steps that led up to the deck with great care. His legs shook and wobbled as he ascended. He was mortified at his obvious weakness. He paused in the middle of the stairs, breathing heavily.

When he finally reached the deck, he was so dizzy that the stars in the night sky looked like they were dancing. He crouched down to catch his breath. He heard nothing except the wind and waves. The cool evening air felt wonderfully refreshing.

Chagum saw a light like a spark out of the corner of his eye. He rubbed his eyes and squinted at the other side of the deck. There was someone standing there. Chagum saw the brief flash of light again: it lit up Hugo's face for a split second in the darkness. He used his hands to push himself upright and started walking across the deck, feeling like he was about to fall with every step. Hugo turned to face him, looking a little surprised.

Chagum walked right up to Hugo and put his back against the side of the ship for support. Hugo stared at him in silence until he caught his breath. Hugo hadn't realized how tall Chagum actually was until now.

He was only a few inches taller than Chagum, and he was considered tall among the Yogoese. Chagum would probably be taller than him in a year or two.

Chagum avoided Hugo's gaze and stared up at the sky. "I've never seen some of these stars before. The sky looks completely different."

Hugo looked up. "For me and the others on this ship, all these stars are familiar. We're getting closer to home."

Hugo set his choru pipe aside. "Do you smoke?" he asked.

Chagum shook his head. "I hate cholu."

"You call it cholu in New Yogo? We call it choru." Hugo smiled, then dropped his gaze to the dark sea.

Chagum didn't fully understand why he'd decided to talk to Hugo. He definitely wanted to understand him more. "I wonder what Kainan Nanai was thinking when he decided to cross this ocean. Even the stars are different on the other side. Yet he decided to go, and he brought a lot of people with him, too."

Chagum glanced sidelong at Hugo. The strangeness of talking to Hugo in this way affected him deeply. He almost felt like Hugo was a long-lost relative from a different place and time.

He was so far away from home now. Kainan Nanai must have looked up and read something in these stars that made him decide to cross the Yaltash ocean. "Is Yogo very different from New Yogo?" Chagum asked.

Hugo kept looking out at the sea as he answered, "Some things are the same; some things are different. Food and architecture and the language are pretty much the same." Hugo exhaled smoke slowly. "The biggest difference is that New Yogo has never been at war. Yogo was

always waging war against its neighbors. When I found out that New Yogo had never gone to war with Rota, Sangal or Kanbal, I was shocked."

Chagum frowned. "I imagine it would be easy to crush a country that has no experience of war."

Hugo turned to face Chagum. "Not...exactly." He blinked. "You probably won't believe me, but I hate war more than anything." His voice was barely louder than a whisper.

Chagum never expected to hear such a thing from Hugo. Wasn't he a soldier and a spy?

"Then why do you work for the Talsh empire?" Chagum asked.

Hugo opened his mouth to say something, then closed it. He looked down at the deck. "That's a long, long story," he said. "I wouldn't even know where to begin." He scratched his nose, then asked, "If you were swallowed up by monster, what would you do? You've been devoured, remember. The only thing you can do after that is watch the monster consume others."

Chagum's eyebrows drew together. "You could try to cut its stomach open from the inside."

Hugo chuckled. "It's a good thought, but the monster's too big. You could cut at it for a lifetime and not harm it at all." Hugo faced the sea again. "So I do what I can. I think you understand me up to a point, right?"

Chagum felt as if he were a stone that had just been dropped into a pool of still water. The ripples spreading out connected him and Hugo. "I still don't understand why you kidnapped me," he said.

"I did it because it's significant," Hugo said. He looked Chagum in the eyes. "In the eyes of the Talsh empire, it's an incredible achievement. Heroic, even."

He paused, then said, "The Talsh princes aren't like the Yogoese nobility. If there's any way for them to avoid the pointless cost of resources and lives in war, they'll take it. If you go home and force your father to abdicate in your favor, New Yogo won't be destroyed."

A chill went through Chagum’s entire body. He didn’t know what to say.

Hugo seemed irritated by Chagum’s passivity. "The wind’s picked up," he said. "I’m going to bed."

Chagum remained rooted to the spot, silent and still. Some time later, he pushed off the side of the boat and took slow, careful steps across the deck, back toward the stairs and his cabin. He gritted his teeth against the pain that jolted his shoulder as he descended the stairs. He understood why Hugo wanted to make him New Yogo’s next Mikado now.

He collapsed on the bedding in his room and covered his face with his hands. He didn’t cry or make a single sound. His racing thoughts kept him up all night.

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The shrill call of a bird startled Chagum awake. His cabin was still pitch dark, but the horizon was purple-orange; it was almost sunrise. He could hear footsteps on the deck above him. Some of the sailors were speaking to each other, but it was hard to make out their words over the cries of the sea birds.

Chagum was curious about what was happening, so he got up silently and tiptoed over to his door. He pushed it open a little and hid underneath the stairs so that he could hear better.

The people speaking were using Yogoese, not Sangalese. He recognized one of the voices as Hugo’s. The other speaker’s voice was familiar, too, but he couldn’t quite place it.

"Yeah, seems so. Seems like they’re pressing their luck, I mean. It’s obvious that the Talsh are jealous of their freedoms."

"Don’t be ridiculous. They’ve been conquered far more thoroughly than Yogo," Hugo said. "We have a long history with them; it’s important to respect that. We should send back an answer as soon as possible."

"Fine, fine. There’s no reason to kick up such a fuss."

Chagum heard footsteps approaching and quickly slipped back into his cabin. He stretched out on his bed and pretended to be asleep. The approaching footsteps stopped outside his door, then kept echoing past it toward the room next door. The door of the room next to his opened and slammed shut.

What were they talking about? He hadn't really understood the conversation, but Hugo's tone troubled him.

Chagum heard the cry of a hawk echo across the ocean. He saw it flying away from the ship through his porthole. Was it carrying a message? Maybe it was carrying a reply to one of the nations that Talsh had conquered. Chagum didn't think it was headed for Yogo; it was probably going to one of the many other nations that Talsh had taken over.

They've been conquered far more thoroughly than Yogo. Hugo's words echoed in Chagum's ears. Were a country's government, laws and culture all assimilated into the existing Talsh system when it was conquered? Why would a country like that send a message to this ship in the first place?

Chagum suddenly realized that he knew next to nothing about the southern continent. He didn't understand their politics or their policies at all. He didn't even know what they were.

Still, it seems like Talsh isn't a monolith. There are differences between the nations they conquer.

Chagum didn't understand how the Talsh empire functioned at all. Didn't the Talsh just go around conquering and destroying indiscriminately? Wouldn't that cause hatred and resentment among the people they conquered? Why didn't people fight back?

So many nations had been swallowed up by the monster. Maybe there were a lot of people who held a grudge lurking in the belly of the beast.

Chagum fell asleep listening to the sound of the waves, thinking about monsters—and hawks.

Chapter 4 - The Storm

The ship crossed over Sangal's southern border when they passed the Sagan islands. It had been two years since the Sagan islands had been conquered by the Talsh empire.

Chagum stood at the edge of the upper deck and observed the large island in front of him. It was shaped like an upside-down bowl; trees stuck out from the very top of it. He remembered Princess Karina abandoning these islands to their fate early in the war against the Talsh. She'd discarded them as easily she would skip a stone over the waves. Her cold voice when she'd announced her decision had been utterly devoid of remorse, or of any feeling at all.

She didn't see the Sagan islands as important.

Chagum considered this situation somewhat ironic. He'd been discarded by his father just like Princess Karina had discarded these islands—and here he was, passing right by them on his way to Talsh.

His captivity ceased to be burdensome the moment he was permitted to get up and move around the ship. He scarcely ever felt like a prisoner at all. He knew he'd been kidnapped and was being forcibly led to the Talsh empire, but all his fears were in the future; his day-to-day life was actually quite pleasant if he didn't think very hard about it. He was suspended between the blue of the sky and the blue of the sea; the sun was warm and bright overhead.

Only thinking about the end of this journey cast a shadow over Chagum's heart. A soft voice inside his mind whispered that he should jump into the sea and end his life before this voyage ended.

Staring at the surface of the sea lit by the strong afternoon sun hurt his eyes. He sighed and faced the mast. The people up in the crow's nest were moving and working at a near-frantic pace.

When he recognized one of the hurrying figures, his eyes widened. *Senna?*

She was at the very highest spot in the crow’s nest, half-climbing the mast and shielding her eyes with her hand.

An old man passed by close to Chagum on the deck. His face was deeply tanned and wrinkled; he might be the oldest man on the ship. When he noticed where Chagum was looking, he smiled.

"She’s like a monkey, isn’t she?" he asked in a gruff, good-natured voice.

"Is it really all right for her to work that high up?" Chagum asked in Sangalese. "What if she falls?"

The old man shrugged. "She’s been doing the same work as the others since she was a kid. It’s not like she’d ever just forget how to captain her own ship."

Chagum reddened slightly at the man’s direct tone. The old man smiled kindly at him.

Senna gazed out over the ocean with her shoulders high and her back straight, looking like the proud ruler of everything she could see.

"Captain! We’re almost to Amarai," the old man called out to her. "Do you see it?"

Senna looked down at him and waved, then she pointed to the southwest. She climbed down from the crow’s nest and started adjusting the sails to prepare the ship for turning.

"It’ll be nice to be home," the old man said. "It’s been almost a year."

"Is your home around here?" Chagum asked.

The old man nodded and pointed at the large mound-shaped island that marked the beginning of the Sagan island chain. "That big island there is Rokurai. Once we’re past it, it’ll take about five days to reach Amarai in good weather. I’m sure our families will scold us harshly for being away for so long."

The old man laughed low in his throat. "The color of the sea is just the same as we left it, at least. Just seeing it again eases my heart. Life’s been so exhausting since the Talsh watchdog came. We’re a pirate ship; we’re not meant to act legitimate." He smiled. "And yet... looking at the sea near home makes me feel completely refreshed."

The old man's eyes flicked to something on the deck. "Oi! You there!" he called out. "Is that how you swab a deck?"

A boy cleaning the deck with a mop glanced up at the old man nervously. The old man rushed over to him and struck him soundly across the cheek. The boy didn't cry out or complain; he rubbed the reddening mark on his cheek while apologizing and bowing his head.

Huh, Chagum thought, wincing a bit on the boy's behalf. *So Senna lives around here somewhere.*

They had sailed into waters that were occupied by the Talsh. Chagum hadn't realized how close this voyage truly was to its end until now. He wondered what he would see on Amarai. Had it been destroyed in the war? How did the Talsh maintain control there?

As he considered such things, he heard someone call out behind him. Startled, Chagum turned and saw a woman standing at the rear of the ship. She was leaning all the way over the edge with her feet dangling in midair.

Chagum approached her slowly. She was an older woman, maybe in her fifties; she was very short and a little overweight. Her arms were thick with muscle. She kept leaning over the edge of the ship as he came closer. He couldn't tell what she was doing even when he was standing right behind her.

The waves roughened, causing the ship to buck upwards, but the woman kept her balance and remained safely on the ship. She lifted her arm so fast that Chagum's vision blurred. There was a long length of fishing line wrapped around her fingers. An instant after she lifted her arm, a small fish landed with a plop on the deck. The woman knelt down and pushed the fish into the deck with her palm until it was still.

She looked up at Chagum with a little smile. She was blushing slightly as if he'd caught her doing something embarrassing. As he took in her finely wrinkled face, he realized that she wasn't Sangalese.

"Doesn't it hurt your fingers to fish without a pole?" he asked.

The woman tilted her head to the side and brought her hand up to her ear; it seemed she was a bit deaf. Chagum came closer to her and asked his question again.

The fisherwoman smiled at him and shook her head. "Nah. I’m used to it." She showed him her fingers, which were thick with callouses. She removed the hook from the fish on the deck with practiced care, then placed the fish into a tub that was nearly full of fresh fish. Then she baited her hook and cast out her fishing line again.

As the hook disappeared beneath the dark blue waves, Chagum leaned against the edge of the ship and asked, "Are you a pirate?"

The fisherwoman glanced at Chagum and shrugged. "I cook, and they let me stay." She checked the tautness of her fishing line and muttered something Chagum couldn’t quite make out.

"I used to live on my family’s boat, but a terrible storm came and wiped out everyone but me. This ship picked me up." She said all this very quietly without looking at Chagum, as if she were talking to herself.

The fisherwoman pulled up on her line again. She poked her tone out and licked her dry lips as her face set in lines of deep concentration. Her eyes locked onto an island in her sight line for a moment; then she started wrapping her line around her fingers. It was clear that she hadn’t caught anything.

"If you go belowdecks, you'll smack your head on the ceiling," she said to Chagum. "You'd do better out here, hanging onto the mast."

"Huh?"

She picked up the tub with the fresh fish and walked up the deck. She settled the tub on her hip and called out to the sailors: "The acha are fleeing into the deep water, and the gulls are retreating to the islands! A storm's coming!"

The sailors nodded in understanding and started spreading the word. "Auntie says a storm's coming!"

Chagum looked up at the perfectly clear blue sky. It certainly didn't look like there would be a storm soon, but Chagum was no expert sailor. He passed by sailors making storm preparations as he returned to his cabin.

Less than an hour later, the sky darkened suddenly and the wind blew in strongly through the cabin's porthole. The ship swayed roughly back and forth as men shouted to one another on the deck. The sound of the rain was loud and constant overhead.

Lightning cut the sky in two. Thunder rumbled beneath Chagum's feet. The wind howled like a wild animal. As Chagum's fear mounted, he heard someone descending the stairs outside his cabin.

Hugo entered suddenly and closed the door, bolting it shut behind him. His hair and clothes were completely soaked. After he bolted the door, he went over to the porthole and locked the board holding it shut with a key. The wooden cover over the porthole stopped rattling.

Hugo lit a candle. Chagum turned toward him and muttered, "When the fisherwoman said a storm was coming, I didn't think it would happen that fast."

Hugo pushed his hair out of his eyes. "She's a genius when it comes to reading the weather. I think this ship picked her up from a Rassharou wreck. Ever since then, she's been looking out for the sailors."

Chagum tilted his head slightly. So that woman was one of the Rassharou? She used to live on a boat with her family, so that made sense.

"Forgive my rudeness, Your Majesty, but I'm going to need to ask you to hold on to this support post," Hugo said. "The storm is about to get worse. If you don't hold on to something, you could get hurt."

Chagum extended his hand to one of the wooden support posts along the side of the cabin and gripped it with one hand.

"No; you're going to have to *really* hold on to it," Hugo said. "Hug it, almost. Let me know when you're ready and I'll blow out the candle."

If the candle fell to the floor in the middle of the storm, the ship could catch fire. Chagum understood why Hugo had to extinguish the candle, but the idea of being left in the dark again made him feel hopeless.

Hugo noticed Chagum's uncertain expression and smiled. "Don't worry. This is a Sangalese ship; they're built for this kind of weather. You're only in danger if you don't hold on, or if something collides with us in the middle of the storm. There were no other ships on the horizon, so we're probably safe from collision. Just hold on to that post and you'll be fine."

Chagum nodded. The ship floated unsteadily over the waves like a leaf caught in an unpredictable air current. Chagum found it difficult to remain standing upright, so he crouched down and wound his arms around the support post. Whenever the ship pitched up and down too strongly, pain shot through his left shoulder.

The wind whistled as the the rain slapped at the sails and fell in sheets across the deck. Chagum felt a slight breeze coming in from somewhere and froze. If air was getting in and the ship tipped over, water would pour into his cabin. The ship creaked and groaned all around him. He wasn't sure if the ship really could stand up to this storm's ferocity. He felt like the ship was being pinched between the cruel sky and the bottomless sea.

Chagum was scared. He gritted his teeth and clung tightly to the support post. He felt someone grab his belt and yank it free; Hugo lashed him to the support post and retied the belt. Surprisingly, that simple change made the ship seem significantly more stable. The shocks he received from the hull still pained his injured shoulder, but they were much more bearable than before.

Chagum took a deep breath. He smelled cholu. Hugo's back was pressed against his to help him remain in place.

Suddenly, the ship went over an enormous wave and tipped completely on its side. Chagum closed his eyes tightly and strengthened his grip on the support post.

"Don't talk. You might bite your tongue." Hugo chuckled in the dark.

Chagum understood the joke, as morbid as it was, and almost laughed.

Hugo started humming a song. Chagum didn't know it, but the melody was in a major key; it was a brave song that drowned out some of the sound of the waves striking the ship.

When he finally got his fear under control, Chagum opened his eyes and smiled. Hugo kept humming the song like a lullaby until the ship righted itself and the rage of the storm lessened.

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The storm lasted for hours without a break. The first sign of the storm's ending was that the violent lashing of the rain on the deck went silent. Chagum couldn't pinpoint exactly when that happened; the ship continued to pitch back and forth and up and down even after the rain stopped. The wind died down a little while after.

There was a knock on the door of Chagum's cabin. "You alive in there? The storm's past," Senna said.

Hugo looked at Chagum and whispered, "Are you all right?"

Chagum nodded.

"We're fine in here, thanks," Hugo said. He stood up, stretched, and felt around for the door's bolt in the dark. He unlatched the door and opened it. Wind and light entered the cabin, making Chagum blink rapidly at the sudden change.

As Chagum freed himself from the support post, Hugo climbed the stairs to the deck. Chagum heard him say, "Huh... uh, wow. Look at that!"

Chagum climbed the stairs to the deck slowly and looked up at the sky, which was a deep, pure red. He sucked in a breath and looked toward the horizon.

The sun was going down, lighting the sky up in red and purple; he'd never seen such a spectacular sunset before. Even the sea around the ship reflected the red of the sky with perfect clarity.

"It looks like the storm polished the sky," Hugo said. He was smiling.

The Sangalese sailors should probably be working to get the ship back on course, but everyone was too stunned by the spectacle to look away. Chagum went right up to the edge of the ship and rested his hands on the guardrail.

The sailors only started moving again when the color of the sky changed from pure red to purple-orange. They milled around and speculated about what the Rassharou fisherwoman would be making for dinner.

Hugo turned toward the steps leading to the cabins, then stopped and looked at Chagum. He was standing as still as a statue against the side of the ship. He scarcely seemed to be breathing. Hugo looked at his

face and watched his eyes flicking back and forth between things that Hugo couldn't see.

When Hugo blinked, Chagum's body flickered like a mirage. Goosebumps rose on the nape of his neck. He suddenly remembered all of the rumors he'd heard about Crown Prince Chagum and his role in saving a water spirit from being devoured by monsters. That act had prevented a drought in New Yogo.

Hugo smelled water in the air. It wasn't just the lingering smell of water from the storm; the scent was much more vividly arresting. It was coming from Chagum.

When Hugo blinked again, the entire ship was engulfed in waves so bright and blue that they shone with an inner light. Hugo gritted his teeth.

Chagum was smiling faintly. Hugo saw him clearly through the crystal-clear water. He looked like he wanted to dissolve into the waves and let the ocean of Nayugul take him away.

He'll escape!

Hugo shook his head to clear it, then reached out and grabbed Chagum's left shoulder. His hands were trembling. Chagum's face twisted in pain as Hugo's fingers dug in.

The next moment, the water of Nayugul surrounding the ship vanished like a popped bubble. The intense smell of the water also receded by slow degrees.

Hugo let go of Chagum and gripped his own knees, breathing heavily. When he looked up, Chagum's face was as still as a carving made from ice. Only his wide-open eyes betrayed his shock.

Hugo and Chagum stared one another down without speaking for what felt like a long time.

Chagum blinked and broke the silence. "Why? How?" His voice was barely louder than a whisper.

Hugo stood up straight and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He closed his eyes and focused on getting his ragged breathing under control. After he composed himself, he looked at Chagum again. "Don't run away. Please."

Hugo's words affected Chagum like a blow. His eyes were full of anguish. Chagum suppressed the renewed pain in his shoulder and kept staring at Hugo, completely dumbstruck.

He knows. About Nayugu. Hugo **knows***.*

In a voice that shook, Chagum ventured, "Can you...see it?"

Hugo nodded slightly. He took a deep breath and faced Chagum squarely. "I can. If you'd gotten sucked in just now, I might have, too." He looked out at the sea. The pain didn't leave his eyes. "Please, please, *please* don't run," he whispered. "If you disappeared now, what would happen to your people?"

Chagum's hands came up to cover his mouth. He buried his face in his palms to conceal his tears and took shallow breaths so that he wouldn't start sobbing. The smell of Nayugu's water lingered in his nostrils. It wasn't as intense as the night when he'd seen the sandworms glowing around his grandfather's ship, but it was still comforting and familiar. He experienced the deep peace and quiet of Nayugu like an invitation; he was irresistibly drawn to it—and Hugo had dragged him back to this harsh and uncompromising world.

Hugo leaned in close and whispered in his ear. "You were born the son of the Mikado," he hissed. "Do you really intend to abandon your people when it's still possible to save them?"

Chagum dropped his hands from his face and looked up.

"Imagine the thousands—no, *tens* of thousands of lives in your hands. I can't believe you really want to flee and just leave them to their fate." Hugo spoke in a low whisper, but he sounded angry.

Chagum's jaw locked. Tears leaked out of the corners of his eyes, but he made no move to wipe them away.

"What do you even expect me to do?" he whispered back. His voice was still slightly unsteady. "I wouldn't even have to save them if you weren't threatening them," he choked out, forgetting to keep his voice down. "I don't need reminding that thousands of lives depend on me."

Chagum closed his eyes. When he opened them, they were bright with tears. "But how am I supposed to save them? By allying with the Talsh?"

Hugo gestured for him to speak more quietly. When Chagum addressed him again, he whispered, but there was venom in his tone.

"You want me to depose my father to save the country. But I'm no threat to my father's power at all. I certainly can't kill him. I'd rather be executed by Talsh soldiers with my head held high than go along with such a plan."

Chagum's tone lost its bite as he spoke. He looked older than he was; old and aggrieved. "The Mikado believes himself to be blessed by the gods. If it comes to war, he will order the army to fight to the last man rather than surrender. I know deposing him would save countless lives, but..."

Chagum unleashed a primal cry like a scream. "Do you really expect me to pay for Talsh mercy with my father's murder?" He took in a long, shuddering breath. "I would become a caged pet of the Talsh empire. My hands would be stained with my own father's blood. My people would never follow me then, and I—" Tears fell down Chagum's pale cheeks. "I wouldn't want to be a Mikado like that."

Hugo's anger visibly deflated. The last light of the sun lingered on the horizon; stars twinkled in the clear evening sky.

Hugo and Chagum stood on the deck facing one another as the world went dark.

Chapter 5 - In the Hawk's Talons

When Senna went to collect the prisoner's tray from outside his room, she frowned. The glass of fruit juice was empty, but he hadn't touched any of the food. There was a film of oil over the meat and vegetable stew.

Senna sighed. She remembered the boy's anguished cry of despair on the deck and shook her head. She didn't understand much Yogoese, but she grasped the general situation well enough. She'd overheard most of the conversation between him and Hugo from the stairs that led to the ship's cabins. While most of the words had been gibberish, there was one thing she was sure of now: the prisoner was the Crown Prince of New Yogo.

Hugo had called him that, and he had called himself the future Mikado; there was no room for doubt. The boy was not simply a noble as Hugo had claimed. Senna knew from the start that he was a valuable hostage, but she never would have guessed how valuable. She found herself wondering how she'd gotten herself mixed up in this plot to destroy—or save?—New Yogo.

For money. Duh.

Senna sat down on the stairs and rested her chin in her hands. Knowing that the prisoner was a prince didn't really change her current situation much. She didn't regret capturing him or worry about what would happen next—but for some reason, her stomach was bothering her.

Is this what being used by the Talsh is like? She frowned at the Crown Prince's door, sighed again, picked up his tray, and left.

***

Hugo caught sight of Senna returning to the kitchen with an almost-full tray of food. He was alone on the deck, leaning against the ship's

side while looking up at the stars. He kept thinking about the spectacular sunset after the storm.

Crown Prince Chagum can see Nayugul.

The tales and songs of his association with a water spirit from the world of magic were not simply tales. There were probably people in his faraway homeland who could see Nayugul as well. If Chagum had managed to escape today, he might have found friends who were able to restore him to the ordinary world, if that was what he wanted. He could also have chosen to remain in Nayugul, away from the world's problems.

It must be rough to be a Crown Prince, with powers like that.

It seemed that Crown Prince Chagum was able to run away to Nayugul practically at will. Remaining in this world and performing his role were conscious choices on his part. Hugo could easily understand the temptation to flee to Nayugul to escape his situation.

It was unfair to rest the fate of an entire nation on Chagum's shoulders, but the more Hugo learned about him, the more encouraged he felt. Perhaps Crown Prince Chagum was uniquely suited to his role in ways that he himself didn't understand.

Hugo stayed up late that night thinking as the stars twinkled overhead and the wind blew through his hair. He was almost home.

***

"Huh? You want to stop in Yogo before we head for Rahan?" Sodok asked.

Hugo sat across from him in his cabin. They were talking over a glass of wine after dinner.

"No way," Sodok said. "Making such a large detour when we're *this* close to delivering the merchandise is foolish. There's no reason to stop there, is there?"

Hugo tapped his fingers along the stem of his glass. "I want to show him how Yogo functions under Talsh rule," he said. "I think that if he

saw how the Talsh govern, he would cease to oppose us. He would certainly understand us better."

Sodok frowned deeply and looked down at his own shaky reflection in his wine glass. "You're planning something," Sodok muttered darkly. "I can feel it. "

Hugo's eyebrows drew together. "Something like...?"

"You're Yogoese through and through, and that Crown Prince has gotten to you," Sodok said. "You plan to support him, don't you?"

Hugo smiled bitterly. "What purpose would that serve?"

Sodok's shoulders stiffened. "None. It was a joke."

Hugo grinned. "That's not really something to joke about. The boy's decision will determine what Talsh does next—and I've never been a traitor." His smile took on an unsettling edge like a predator's. "If he were arrogant, we could use his vanity to manipulate him. If he were stupid, we could simply lie. But he isn't proud or an idiot, so we need more sophisticated methods."

Sodok's smile was false and plastered on. "That almost sounds like praise."

Hugo chuckled darkly into his wine glass.

Sodok thunked his glass on the table with a scowl. "Do you have any idea of the position you're currently in?" he whispered threateningly. His eyes reflected the light of the cabin's candles. "You've always taken untenable risks and acted unpredictably. We've known each other for a long time; I know how you operate. Sometimes, you scare even me with your recklessness. I never know whose side you're on. All I know is that I wouldn't want you as an enemy."

Hugo kept smiling.

"Never forget how high you've risen, Hugo," Sodok said. "You are not Talsh. Prince Raul saw promise in you; without that, you wouldn't be here. There are a mountain of people who would love to take over your position it you made so much as a single wrong move."

Sodok leaned forward and whispered, "And this prince is a magnificent prize. You're a Yogoese spy bringing in a Yogoese Crown

Prince. The Talsh see no difference between New Yogo and Yogo. They're not going to trust you no matter what you do."

Hugo looked up from his glass and sighed. He stood up. "I appreciate the warning. I'm not expecting you to stick your neck out for my sake."

Sodok glared at Hugo's retreating back as he left the cabin.

***

When the ship entered the harbor, Chagum's door and porthole were shut and locked. The weather was cool that day, but without any air circulating, Chagum's room quickly became stuffy and hot.

Chagum laid out flat on his back and stared at the ceiling. He was sweaty and lethargic; it was so hot that he couldn't even think about anything.

The sailors shouted and stomped above him as they left the ship. When everything was quiet again, Chagum's door cracked open. Hugo appeared in the doorway; bright sunlight streamed over his shoulders.

"Would you like to come up to the deck, Your Majesty?" he asked.

Chagum remained stretched out on the floor and didn't move. He didn't really want to get up, but the breeze blowing in through the open door felt quite pleasant. He stood up slowly and stretched. Hugo waited patiently as he composed himself, then led him up to the deck.

When Chagum saw the harbor, he briefly lost the ability to speak. The buildings were the largest he'd ever seen. They extended so far into the sky that they seemed to touch the clouds. Those buildings couldn't possibly be real; the heat must be making him hallucinate.

The ships in the harbor were like a tiny forest grove surrounded by mountains: the masts were like trees and the buildings enclosed the harbor on three sides. The sails of the ships were all different colors; people from many lands must come to trade here.

"This is Manon," Hugo said. "It used to be Sangal's southernmost port city. That Talsh still use it primarily for trade. Many of these buildings are new construction."

Chagum looked at Hugo with an expression of disbelief. "You mean that all Talsh cities are like this?"

Hugo shook his head. "Nah, this still looks like a Sangalese city for the most part. The streets are narrow and not well-maintained."

The streets here are narrow? Compared to what? All the roads Chagum could see were wider than the ones in Kosenkyo. The scale of the streets and buildings and their unsettling regularity were completely unfamiliar to Chagum.

"Who lives in Manon?" Chagum asked. "Rich people from Sangal?"

Hugo narrowed his eyes against the harsh, bright light of the sun. "This is a nice place to live in a lot of ways," he said. "It's well-guarded by Talsh soldiers and thrives in trade. But..." He paused and frowned. "Well, they're a conquered territory. If they don't send their sons to war, the Talsh impose heavy taxes on them. Most of the families that live here are like that. They've lost fathers, brothers and sons in Talsh wars."

Hugo faced Chagum and said, "It's the same with every nation that Talsh conquers. Waging war takes a lot of resources, so the Talsh heavily tax the conquered nation's best product or industry. Most people choose to pay the taxes at first—but men who fight with honor in Talsh wars gain citizenship for themselves and for their families, which exempts them from paying. That's how the Talsh get the men of the nations they've conquered to fight for their cause. They want to spare their families the burden of the heavy taxes."

Hugo looked out at the harbor. "Talsh becomes rich by stealing the wealth of others. The Emperor directs the ravening horde to their next target. The Talsh empire is a beast that devours other nations for the sake of its own survival."

Why is he telling me this? Chagum wondered. He'd never truly understood Hugo's motives, but he did want to know more about the Talsh empire.

"What do the people think of the Talsh?" Chagum asked. "Are they unhappy?"

Hugo didn't look at him; his eyes were fixed on something far away. "The Talsh call what they do 'conquest,' but it's slow. They leave a nation's language and currency and culture alone—for a while. They assimilate new nations into the empire very slowly, so most people just get used to it. Yogo was conquered more than twenty years ago; you can still find some of our old coins in circulation, but it's rare. Warriors, merchants and children speak the Talsh language as well as Yogoese. They have to; the best-paying jobs require it. In a generation or two, I don't think anyone will speak Yogoese anymore."

Chagum's face went white.

"Would you like to see Yogo, Your Majesty?"

Hugo's question shocked him like a slap to the face. See Yogo? Was that even possible? His ancestors were from there. Seeing it would give him a glimpse of one possible future for New Yogo.

"Yes," he said. "I'd like to see it, if I can."

The corners of Hugo's eyes crinkled in a smile. "Then I shall take you there before we go to the Talsh capital. I was planning on stopping there already, which is why we're staying in Manon for the night. This may be the last time the pirates get to take a breather until this mission is over."

Chagum frowned slightly. "Why were you planning to go to Yogo?"

Hugo answered without hesitation: "I wanted to show you that New Yogo wouldn't be destroyed. Seeing it with your own eyes would be more persuasive than anything I could say."

Chagum felt uneasy. Hugo was always giving him mixed messages. But if he could go to Yogo before being led before the Talsh emperor, so much the better.

As he looked out at the harbor, he was strangely glad that he was here in this foreign port at just this moment. If he'd never been kidnapped, he would never have learned so much about the Talsh or

seen the world with his own two eyes. The world was so much richer and more complicated than the confining palace he'd left behind in Kosenkyo. He was being led directly into the heart of enemy territory, but not everything about that was bad.

Maybe I'm supposed to be here. Whether I am or not, I don't have much choice, so there's no point resisting.

The Talsh empire was vast and powerful, but they hadn't won yet. Their war with New Yogo hadn't even officially started. If luck and time favored him, New Yogo might still find a way to remain free. It wasn't too late to make the Talsh regret ever capturing him.

Chagum blinked and squinted in the bright light of the sun. He was still unsure of himself. Shuga wasn't here to help him or serve as a sounding board, so he had to make all the choices himself. He hoped he would choose correctly.

It was like Hugo had said before: thousands of lives depended on him. He couldn't just abandon his people and leave them to die. As Chagum's eyes took in the spectacle of Manon's harbor, he stood up a little straighter.

Someone coughed behind Chagum. When he turned, he saw the Rassharou fisherwoman behind him. She carried buckets full of fish guts and fresh vegetable peelings from the kitchen. She cast the waste buckets over the side of the ship to empty them, then faced Chagum and Hugo on her way back to the galley.

"Do you want to visit Manon?" Chagum called out. She tilted her head; he repeated the question a little louder.

The Rassharou fisherwoman made a face. "Why would I? It's got Talsh stink all over it," she spat. She gathered up her buckets and walked away.

When Chagum faced Hugo to express his surprise, Hugo was smiling. "Most Rassharou are prejudiced against the Talsh," he said.

"Why?"

"When the Talsh took over the islands of the Sugal Sea, they prohibited the Rassharou from entering the ocean surrounding the islands. Rassharou aren't permitted to live in areas dominated by the

Talsh. The ones who wander in by accident are captured and sent to a few different islands to work. Most become fishermen, though I heard that some were used as spies against Sangal." He paused. "The Talsh conscript their sons for the war effort, too."

Hugo's eyes scanned the harbor. "If you think about it, the Rassharou and the Talsh are natural enemies. The Talsh operate by conquering nations that have established borders. The Rassharou have never respected any borders between nations; their home is the sea. The Talsh are harsh on everyone who travels to work—traveling merchants, artists and the like are subjected to strict laws when they cross territory lines. If they don't have a traveler's pass, they can get stuck in a Talsh city and never be allowed to leave."

Chagum nodded in understanding.

A bright voice called out from the end of the plank that connected the ship and the dock. Senna grasped a carefully wrapped package tightly in both hands. She must have bought something in Manon. One of the sailors walked up behind her and tried to snatch the package out of her hands. Senna threw the package up into the air in front of her and dashed toward the deck.

What Senna did next was so fast that Chagum couldn't see it. As she rushed up the plank to catch the package, the young sailor behind her lost his balance and fell into the sea with a sharp cry. There was a terrific splash.

Senna caught her package expertly and hopped onto the deck of the ship. "You idiot," Senna called out to the drenched sailor. "You're ten years too late to catch me! Cool your head in the dirty harbor water, moron."

Senna tucked a tendril of hair behind her ear and looked at Hugo and Chagum.

"What did you get?" Hugo asked.

Senna shrank back a little, hovering over her package as if it were priceless treasure; then she laughed and started unwrapping the package. "Want one?"

She passed something small wrapped in paper to Hugo. She took another small, paper-wrapped object in her own hand and tore the wrapping open. Inside were small, peach-colored bean jam cakes called chaz.

"Chaz?" Hugo asked. "Where did you even find these, Senna?"

Senna rested a hand on her hip and puffed out her chest proudly. "Duh, I've been to Manon before. I know where the Yogoese merchants sell their stuff." She turned to Chagum. "Have you ever had these before?" she asked.

Chagum tilted his head slightly. He'd eaten bean jam cakes before, but these looked a little different. They were definitely a different color. "Can I have one?" he asked.

"Go ahead."

Chagum unwrapped the bean jam cake and tasted it. The cake had a smooth, soft texture that was easy to chew; the taste of fruit juice in the filling was incredibly sweet—and very familiar.

Senna watched anxiously for his reaction.

"I haven't had one of these in a long time," he said with a smile. A citrus-like aftertaste lingered in his mouth. "This is just like saz."

Senna's smile was radiant. "Eating lots of sweet things is the best way to recover your energy and strength, so you should eat lots and lots of them. I'm going to buy tea now. Leave a couple for when I get back," she said all in one breath, then spun around and immediately ran down the plank back to Manon.

"She didn't have to do that," Hugo muttered.

Seeing and tasting saz again put Chagum in an unusually good mood. He grinned down at his bean jam cake and took another bite.

"She talks like a sailor," Hugo said. "Doesn't that bother you?"

Chagum shook his head. "Nah. It's not like she knows how to talk politely anyway." He glanced up at Hugo. "Does she?"

Hugo laughed and shook his head.

Chagum wondered if what Senna had said about eating lots of sweet things would actually help him get stronger. There was only one way to find out.

Chapter 6 - A Brief Flash of Light

After the ship left Manon, Chagum asked Senna if he could help with any of the work on the ship.

"Huh? You really want to help with cleaning and drawing water and stuff?"

Chagum nodded. "Whatever I can do, I will. I really just want to move around more."

Senna hesitated. Chagum was a prince; from her perspective, he was a high and lofty personage who sat above the clouds. Manual labor of any kind was not appropriate for someone of his status.

Chagum plucked the cleaning cloth from her hand and dipped it in a basin of water and lye, then started scrubbing the deck with a group of other sailors. He moved stiffly to protect his left shoulder at first, but loosened up as he moved, allowing him to work faster.

Senna was shocked, but she didn't think she could talk him out of working, even if she wanted to in the first place.

When Chagum started sweating and removed his shirt, his white skin was practically blinding. Senna didn't know what to think as watched him working to the limit of his physical abilities. He was definitely weird for a Crown Prince, right?

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The other sailors excluded Chagum as the prisoner he was at first, but after a few days of working among them, Chagum started making friends. The work got easier for him as he grew more practiced at it, so the sailors gradually gave him more and more to do.

The sailors were rough and crude in their manners, but not unfriendly. After a few weeks of work, Chagum was treated more or less

like the hopeless little brother of the Sangalese sailors who needed a lot of help to get caught up with everyone else.

Whenever the ship dropped anchor near an island with fresh water, the sailors took Chagum to the beach and taught him how to dive. They also showed him how to identify the larger currents so that he wouldn't endanger himself while swimming.

Many of the sailors praised him for his diving skill. "You know, you're not too bad at this. For a Yogoese person, anyway." Their praise was usually accompanied by a companionable slap to his back or good shoulder.

Chagum wasn't comfortable being touched by the sailors at first, but he grew accustomed to their casual friendliness as the weeks passed. Living and working among the sailors was completely different from his life in the imperial palace, where no one had dared to touch him at all.

When Chagum could dive to the same depths as the other sailors, Senna took him by the hand and guided him on the sea floor, pointing out shellfish and huge crabs scuttling around in the sand.

She also taught him how to communicate underwater in the same way as the other sailors. The basic method was a series of finger-taps into the shoulder; the number and rhythm of taps represented individual letters. Senna taught Chagum the letters by swimming up behind him and tapping messages into his shoulder. She was so patient in teaching him that he wondered sometimes if she was a friend or an enemy.

"If you hear someone coming up behind you and they don't tap your shoulder, don't turn around," Senna warned him. "You'll get a short sword in your gut if you do. People like that don't want to talk."

There were several types of pirate communication that varied between nations, and even between islands. The style of communication that Chagum was learning was called oar language, since it matched the rowing patterns of many Sangalese oarsmen.

"Tapping a greeting to someone in our language is the same way as telling someone your name," she said. "They'll know right away that you're a friend."

The first thing Senna taught Chagum how to do was tap his name. Chagum remembered the taps easily, then used his understanding of those letters to spell words and guess at how other letters were tapped.

"I think I get it, kind of," he said.

Senna's expression was dubious. "All right, then, prove it. Turn around."

Chagum turned around.

Senna tapped a message into his right shoulder.

"Senna...swims...fast."

Senna's eyes widened in surprise. "Amazing! How did you learn that so fast?"

Chagum laughed and turned around. "It's easy! But kind of ticklish. I prefer tapping underwater." Then he smiled, turned away from Senna again, and jumped into the sea.

Chagum and Senna splashed and swam in the ocean like young children until sunset. Senna floated on the surface of the water with her hair fanned out and her face to the sky.

This won't last.

The thought pierced Chagum's heart suddenly and without warning. He felt like he would never have an experience like this again. This day was a brief flash of light in the darkness. When the light went out, he would never see it again.

Sodok stared out at Chagum swimming from a place on the beach. "That is the weirdest Crown Prince I've ever seen," he muttered.

Hugo was standing next to him; he laughed. "You're telling me. My heart almost stopped when he started cleaning."

Sodok looked at him with a puzzled expression, so Hugo mimed cleaning the deck.

"He's actually pretty good at it," Hugo said. "He can also braid rope. He does it like it's the most natural thing in the world. The sailors were pretty strict with him at first, but now he pretty much knows what he's doing." He looked out at Chagum. "I think those songs about him leaving the palace to save the water spirit in New Yogo are true."

"Songs? Oh, you mean ‘The Water Spirit and the Brave Prince,’ from Sangal? The one where he supposedly traveled all over New Yogo with a bodyguard?"

Hugo nodded.

"I thought it was mostly made up by the people to make an interesting tale, but maybe some parts of it are true. He’s certainly acting like he’s been out of the palace before." Sodok snorted in contempt.

Chagum dove as gracefully as any of the Sangalese sailors. As he watched him swim from the beach, he remembered their first meeting.

It was just after the ship left Manon. Chagum’s face had betrayed nothing as he’d listened to Hugo’s explanation and introduction of Sodok, but his eyes had been sharp and alert. When Hugo had told Chagum that Sodok was a magic weaver, he’d appeared slightly surprised, but not in the least repulsed. This had surprised Sodok greatly; the royal family of New Yogo had always scorned and despised magic weavers. Rasugu had told him that Crown Prince Chagum knew a bit of magic weaving himself; it seemed that this claim was true.

Sodok sat down on a stone on the beach and rested his chin on his hand. He didn’t understand why Hugo thought Crown Prince Chagum was so valuable, but his charisma was undeniable. Even Sodok found himself liking some of his qualities.

Hugo waved to Chagum as he came out of the water. He wasn’t paying attention to Sodok at all.

Just after dinner, Chagum found a clear spot near the prow of the ship and sat down. He didn’t think he’d ever get tired of sunsets at sea. Red and purple clouds nestled thickly along the horizon line; overhead, there was a narrow strip of clear sky.

Chagum heard Senna’s footsteps behind him; he recognized her gait.

"I brought something good," she said, holding out a wine jar.

She undid the stopper and poured the wine into two cups. Although the boat was rocking, she didn’t spill a single drop.

"What is it?" Chagum asked.

"Red wine," she said. "It’s sweet. You’ll like it."

Chagum brought the cup to his lips with trepidation. When he inhaled, he was a little surprised. "This smells like fruit juice," he said.

"Isn't it nice?" Senna asked.

Her white mouse, Poi, poked his head out of Senna's clothes. Senna brought her cup close to his face; he leaned forward and rested his front paws in the rim of the cup. Then he stuck his face into the wine and started lapping it up eagerly with a contented expression.

Chagum's eyes widened. "Poi *drinks*?"

"He loves it. I always give him a little of whatever I'm drinking," Senna said. She lifted one finger and patted Poi fondly on the head. "There now. You're too small to drink much more than that. The rest is mine."

Senna tilted her cup into her own mouth, then drained the wine in one long gulp. She drank wine as casually as drinking water.

"You must be used to drinking," Chagum muttered.

"I've had a drink—at least one, I mean—every day since I was eight. My dad Rakui had the best tolerance of anyone in the family, but I've built up mine quite a lot, too. By my thirties or so, I should be able to drink him under the table." She laughed and topped off Chagum's wine.

"Seems like you don't drink much at all," she said. "Are noble families really that strict?"

Chagum smiled sadly. "My parents didn't really teach me much about anything themselves, and I didn't eat or drink with them very often."

Senna's expression mixed surprise and confusion. "I was taught by the older men and women in my family from a very young age. I've never even heard of anyone who wasn't raised the same way."

Chagum looked up at the wisps of cloud drifting across the sky. "My mom hugged me sometimes, but I have no memories of my father giving me a hug, ever."

Chagum and Senna sat in companionable silence for a while. Senna looked up at the star-bright sky and said, "I don't think I would have liked being a prince."

Chagum looked at Senna with his mouth and eyes wide open in shock.

"You're a prince, aren't you?" she asked. "Of New Yogo."

Chagum didn't say anything; Senna didn't wait for his reply.

"It's been a long voyage. I guessed who you were based on things you and Hugo said. It's a good thing I'm not blinded by greed and that Hugo knows he can trust me, or I might have sold you off to someone else long ago." She laughed. "But a contract's a contract. It's like I told you before. If you were nothing but a proud, self-serving prince, I would have shipped you off as soon as I could without a second thought."

Senna's face was lost in the shadows of the enveloping night. Wind flapped the sails. After a long silence, Senna said, "If you want to run away, I'll let you."

Chagum stared at the sea. He knew that Senna was serious. He thought about all the things he might be able to do with his freedom, but all his thoughts led to the same conclusion. "Thank you," Chagum said, "but I'm going to Talsh."

The bell signaling the sailors to go to bed rang out into the darkness and echoed over the water before finally fading away.

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As the ship neared the southern continent, the sun was less hot; it was chilly in the mornings and evenings. The color of the ocean water deepened to a rich, dark blue. Chagum knew that places equidistant from the equator were about equally hot or cold, with the tropical countries like Sangal being the warmest. It was one thing to read about weather patterns in a book; it was quite another to experience them firsthand. He had left his own homeland in the middle of spring, but it was almost the end of winter here; soon it would be spring again.

It's like the seasons are upside-down, Chagum thought.

They sailed through a few small storms and were sometimes becalmed for a few hours at a time, but the first storm the ship had sailed through was by far the worst.

The ship finally docked safely at the port of Hashiro in Yogo at the very beginning of Yogo's spring. They were able to stop there instead of

the nearer port in the Orm territory thanks to favorable winds. The cliffs surrounding the port were a greenish white; vegetation clung to them in patches.

"Do you see the ruins on top of that cliff?" Hugo asked while pointing above the harbor town.

When Chagum looked where Hugo was pointing, he could clearly see a Yogo-style building with white plastered walls and gleaming black roof tiles. It looked like an old palace, though half the walls had crumbled to ruin and it was clearly overgrown by tall, withered grass.

"That was Prince Torugal's palace," Hugo said. "My people call it the northern palace."

Chagum leaned forward and squinted to get a closer look. Torugal and Kainan Nanai, a Master Star Reader, had led many of the people of Yogo north to settle on the Nayoro peninsula. Chagum never dreamed that his palace would still be standing—or that he would be allowed to actually see it. He remembered seeing the vividly colored royal palace of Sangal during his first visit there, standing on the Hill of the Full Moon with Shuga.

Yogo wasn't as visually arresting at first glance; its details were far more muted and subtle. Hashiro seemed to be a poorer city than Manon; there were fewer buildings and merchants close to the docks. Most of the architecture was Yogoese, with only a few large Talsh stone structures spaced far apart. The harbor felt familiar, but the feeling was eerie, uncanny: he couldn't trust it.

"It doesn't seem as lively as Manon," Chagum said as he surveyed the city from the ship's deck. "My ancestors came from this place. I thought it must have a rich history and culture, but..."

"Yogo does have all of that, but your image of it seems to be stuck in the past," Hugo said. "Yogo conquered Horam and Orm and became the largest nation on the continent—before the Talsh came along. Internal strife among the imperial family weakened Yogo before that. Then Horam and Orm rose up in revolt, which stretched the country's resources thin. Talsh swept in and finished Yogo off."

There was a cold light in Hugo's eyes. "The winters have gotten longer and colder over the past few years. The summers are shorter and Yogo gets a lot less rain than it used to. Because of that, there are fewer farmers and sparser harvests. There's no reason to come this far south just to fish; Sangal is better suited for that. The people suffer in poverty, but the current Mikado can't do much about that. He fought hard to keep the country free, but his pride prevents him from helping the nation prosper under Talsh rule."

Chagum was stunned: Hugo criticized the Mikado so casually and easily; he had no respect for him at all.

Hugo surveyed his homeland with a stern expression and didn't look at Chagum. All the trees that Chagum could see growing on top of the cliffs were only just starting to sprout new spring leaves after the long winter. It was a lonely and comfortless view.

It doesn't look like the beginning of spring. It looks like the end of autumn.

There wasn't a single spark of life in the land or the harbor city, or even in the ocean surrounding it. This was Chagum's first time seeing Yogo, but he understood at a glance that the country had been struck by some kind of terrible disaster. The atmosphere was thick and oppressive; it was like the air was sucking away the country's essential vitality.

Harsher, longer winters, short summers and no rain.

That was the complete opposite of New Yogo. The winters had gotten progressively warmer over the years; summer was the longest season. There had also been no issues with rain since the water spirit matured. Chagum remembered standing with his grandfather on the deck of New Yogo's flagship with sandworms glowing all around them in the light of the moon. The ocean near his home teemed with life. The Yona Ro Gai had been migrating from the south to the north in a long line like a river of light.

It's spring.

The water dwellers had told him that. They'd seemed happy about it, but he didn't know why. He only realized now that Nayugu was colder

in the south than it was in the north. When Hugo had pulled him back from Nayugu after the terrible storm, it had been so much colder than what he was used to. He hadn't seen many water dwellers swimming around in Nayugu's ocean, either.

If it was spring in Nayugu on the northern continent, maybe it was more like autumn on the southern continent. Sagu and Nayugu often mirrored one another. Hadn't anyone on the southern continent noticed? Rasugu and Sodok were magic weavers, weren't they? It would be strange if they hadn't seen or felt anything. Even if the entire southern continent was dominated by the Talsh—

—But wait. Maybe that *was* the reason: maybe the Talsh knew that their continent was dying. That was why they wanted to conquer the northern continent: for survival.

Chagum wanted to ask Hugo about Nayugu, but if no one but magic weavers knew about the change in seasons and what the effects of that were, then he might be giving away valuable information to a spy. He didn't want to take that risk.

As Chagum took in the view, a young boy employed as a harbor watcher called out something while waving his hands frantically. Hugo faced the boy and asked, "What's wrong?"

The boy pointed to the eastern edge of the harbor. Hugo frowned severely and smacked his lips together. "Forgive me, Your Majesty," he said.

"For what?" Chagum asked.

"I promised that I would show you Yogo, but it seems that won't be possible." He turned toward Sodok, who was leaning with his back against the mast.

"What's going on?" Sodok asked.

Chagum looked back and forth between Hugo and Sodok.

"Prince Raul's soldiers are coming," Hugo said.

Chagum felt chills down his spine. Prince Raul—the Second Prince of the Talsh empire.

Ten dark riders appeared in the far distance, moving along the edges of the cliffs. Behind them were two black horse-drawn carts flying flags

patterned with the design of a hawk's wings.

"It's the Hokuyoku—the northern army. They take their orders directly from Prince Raul."

Chagum frowned at Sodok. "It looks like he betrayed you," he said to Hugo.

Hugo shook his head. "He only reported my activities because he was worried. I came to Yogo without Prince Raul's permission, so I really shouldn't be surprised that this happened. Sodok didn't betray me; we've worked together for years."

Hugo paused, then said, "I must ask you again to forgive me, Your Majesty. I'm required to report to Prince Raul immediately in the Talsh capital. Please accompany me there."

Chagum nodded. His lips were pale and drained of blood. His apprehension was obvious in his eyes. When Hugo saw his emotions so clearly displayed on his face, he was reminded of Chagum's youth and inexperience.

Chagum closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them again, he was steadier. His eyes flashed like the light of sun on steel.

"Your Majesty," Hugo said hoarsely. "Please. Save your people." He bowed and walked away without saying another word.

Senna came up from belowdecks and looked around. When she saw Chagum, she ran over to him at top speed. "Are Talsh soldiers really headed for the harbor?" she asked.

Chagum repressed his fear enough to smile. "It looks like it."

Senna stared directly at him. "So...does that mean you're getting off here?"

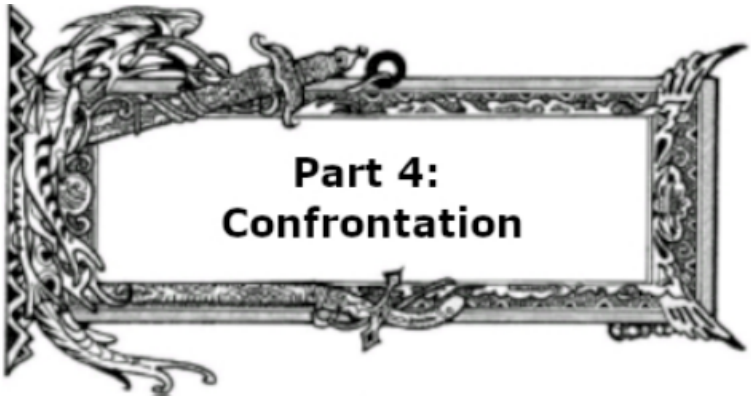
Chagum nodded.

Senna looked down, then glanced up in the direction of the harbor. Neither Chagum nor Senna had expected they would have to say goodbye so suddenly.

Senna kept her eyes on the harbor. "Strange. I'm usually happy at the end of a job, but...not this time."

Chagum rested his hand on Senna's shoulder. "Senna. You really are lucky. Can you try to help me, too, and lend me your luck for the future?"

She looked at him in surprise and frowned slightly. "Of course I can." She took Chagum's hand and said, "I give to you the blessing of the sea. If you're anywhere in the Yaltash ocean, nothing bad will happen to you."



Part 4: Confrontation

Chapter 1 - The Talsh Rider

It was early spring. Sparse trees straggled across the grassy landscape. Eight mounted cavalry riders crested a ridge and rode in the direction of a huge stable. The closest rider to the stable increased his pace and pulled suddenly in front of the others. His stallion was spirited and half-wild; the horse chomped at the bit as it tore across the plain. The stallion's coat was the same color as ash. To be honest, the stallion was somewhat cruel and ugly-looking; he was obviously very powerful, but also very mean-spirited. Unlike most stallions, he hadn't been castrated.

Controlling this horse was likely quite difficult, but its rider was a man of slight build, not very tall or obviously strong. He was a man in his early thirties with copper-brown skin and golden hair. He wore a steel circlet with a single hawk feather stemming from a red gem in the center. The crown glinted in the strong light of the southern sun. This rider was Prince Raul, the Second Prince of the Talsh empire.

As Prince Raul approached a barn, stablehands and horse tenders dropped to one knee. A horse trainer named Orum approached and accepted the reins of the gray stallion. He brought his tanned face close to the horse's and whispered something, then dropped the reins and moved to the horse's side. He got to his knees and extended both hands upward so that Prince Raul could step on them to dismount.

Orum kept his face down even after Prince Raul was on the ground. When he stood up and took the horse's bridle, his hands were trembling violently. The metal fittings on the horse's saddle and tack jangled.

"He's better," Prince Raul said. "He runs faster than he did three days ago." He removed a small gold pouch from his breast pocket and tossed it at Orum's feet. Then he faced the stable and walked toward one of the kneeling men.

Orum bent to retrieve the pouch with his knees shaking. He still didn’t look up.

When Orum touched the coins in the pouch, he felt immediate relief. His predecessor had missed a small tumor on one of the horse's rear legs. The horse couldn't run as fast because of it, so Prince Raul had cut out one of his eyes.

If you can’t see the important details, there’s no point in having two eyes.

None of the horse handlers or stablehands looked up as Prince Raul passed them by. They kept their heads down low.

There was an older man standing near the entrance to the stable. Prince Raul fiddled with something in one of his leather saddlebags, then approached the man.

The man bowed low from the waist. "May the gods favor you, Your Majesty," he said. He looked at Prince Raul as he spoke and didn’t seem to be afraid of him. His collar was lined with cloth-of-gold; there was a gold collar around his neck attached to a thin ribbon. He was one of the Tal Yutar, which meant "man at the end of the road" in the Talsh language. The gold around their necks represented success in life: these men were so rich and influential that they controlled most of the policies and future plans of the Talsh empire.

Prince Raul adjusted a pouch on his belt, shook hands with the Tal Yutar, then nodded at him. "Why have you come? Are there orders from the palace?"

"I bring news. Your Majesty's precious cargo has arrived safely at the port of Hashiro."

Prince Raul nodded, faced the palace and started walking toward it. "Finally, the prey is in the hawk's talons. That's all that kid is to Hugo Arayutan."

There was a cold gleam in Prince Raul's eyes. "I know the cargo is tempting, Your Majesty, but I must ask...what do you think of the detour to Yogo?"

Prince Raul spun on his heel to face the Tal Yutar again. His face expressed clear irritation at the delay. Then he smirked. "How amusing. Have you taken an interest in the matter yourself, Kurz?"

Kurz's face went blank. He looked into Prince Raul's ice-cold eyes and said, "Of course I have. You wouldn't rush back in such a hurry if

you didn’t have a good reason."

Prince Raul unwound a horsewhip from his belt and lashed it through the air. "I’m eager to hear Hugo’s excuse. It’s probably a good one." His lips twitched upward in a slight smile. He cracked his whip once more, then changed the subject.

"It seems that Ara Jiru raiders are attacking the Arumusul border again." Soldiers under Prince Raul’s command had been dispatched to Arumusul’s western edge. The nation over the border belonged to the Ara Jiru people; they had attacked Arumusul’s cities mercilessly, mounted on horseback. News of the attacks had only come in that morning.

Kurz shrugged. "It’s always the same news. The raiders are nothing to worry about. We already know how they fight and where they’ll attack next. We have no casualties on our side; it seems that our conscripts from Orm bore the brunt of the attacks. I doubt we’ll suffer much in terms of losses."

Prince Raul fixed his calculating gaze on Kurz. "Is that true? Are the only casualties our conscripts from Orm?"

Kurz’s spine went rigid. "Yes, but..."

"Unacceptable. Having our conquered nations suffer on the empire’s behalf is not fair," Prince Raul snapped. "We’re about to attack the north. We can’t have dissension in our ranks."

Kurz broke into a cold sweat. There was no excuse or reply that he could give that Prince Raul would accept. Prince Raul hated excuses; Kurz understood that well.

"I take full responsibility and apologize deeply, Your Majesty," Kurz said.

Prince Raul nodded sharply, turned his back to Kurz and walked toward the palace.

Chapter 2 - A Grim Journey

Chagum's journey with the Talsh soldiers was far different from his sunny sea voyage with Senna and the Sangalese pirates. When the new ship stopped in Manon again, Hugo brought Chagum a face covering that he'd bought in the harbor. When Chagum received the face covering, he stared at Hugo in stony silence. It seemed that Hugo was intending to treat him as a Crown Prince from here on out, with all the standards of propriety that came along with that title. It was almost like they'd never talked to one another about Yogo and war on Senna's ship in the middle of the night.

Chagum's Talsh escort treated him with the utmost respect, but he found their appearance somewhat jarring. They were tall, very tall, with copper-brown skin and eyes like gold coins. They looked utterly alien to him; even several days into their shared journey, he wasn't entirely comfortable looking at them.

Chagum knew a bit about Talsh because of his education; he remembered reading about the general appearance and characteristics of the Talsh people in his history books. Seeing them in person was different. It was hard to believe that they were actually real. Talsh had been a distant threat for so long that the soldiers' sudden appearance at the harbor and strange physical characteristics hit him like a bolt of lightning.

He remembered the first time one of the soldiers had addressed him in Yogoese. He'd felt a chill go through his entire body. None of New Yogo's soldiers could speak the Talsh language; he was fairly certain of that. Chagum knew Rotan, Kanbalese, and Sangalese as well as his native Yogoese, but he didn't understand the Talsh language at all.

The soldiers' weapons, the metal fittings and tack on their horses, and even the way they moved was completely different from what Chagum was used to. He was accustomed to riding in a cart when he

traveled, but the shaking and unsteadiness of the cart's wheels was new; he spent most of his time vaguely nauseated.

Chagum felt his impatience mounting with every day that passed. He wondered how far they were from the Talsh capital. Ten days, twelve? Prince Raul was waiting for him there. He wanted to learn as much as he could about Talsh before their meeting so that he would be prepared. There were only a few days left before the end of the journey; Chagum would make copious use of them all.

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Sodok's presence on this journey troubled Chagum deeply. He'd known before the Talsh escort appeared that Sodok was a magic weaver and Rasugu's brother, but these facts suddenly became much more urgent to him. He'd fought Rasugu in Sangal; the man's terrifying face would be burned into the back of his mind forever. Chagum kept expecting Rasugu to reappear, if only to mock him, but he never did.

Late one night, Chagum and his escort entered the territory of Orm, which bordered Yogo. The inn they stopped at was very high-class and clearly expensive. Before Chagum could go to sleep, Sodok called on him in his room. He looked quite a bit like Rasugu; Chagum couldn't help but frown at him.

Sodok turned toward Chagum and said, "My brother tends to lose interest in the prey once it's been caught. He'll soon be amply rewarded by Prince Raul. The social status of our family may also change, so I may soon be employed elsewhere."

Sodok had always called Chagum "the prey" or "the merchandise" when speaking in front of him, probably so that he wouldn't accidentally betray Chagum's true identity to outsiders. Chagum suspected that Sodok also called him that to aggravate him, but Chagum didn't mind for some reason.

I know why I don't mind. He's rude, just like Torogai is.

Chagum could almost picture Torogai's wrinkled, wizened face. He smiled; he'd always liked magic weavers. He'd never met a single one

who was afraid of him, or afraid of offending him.

"I'm sure you'll get your reward as well," Sodok said mockingly to Hugo. He returned his gaze to Chagum and shrugged.

Chagum heard voices in the hall; someone was talking to his guards. A moment later, the door to Chagum's room opened, revealing a few kitchen workers carrying trays of food. One woman laid out dishes on the room's low table. Another set out a large serving dishes full of cuts of roasted fatty beef and vegetables that had been breaded and fried. It was a simple meal of traditional Orm foods, but the portions were large enough to feed the entire escort party and then some.

The savory salt smell of the meat wafted through the air. Tiny winged insects landed on the clean plates and the roast beef; they were clearly attracted by the smell. Hugo shut the room's window firmly to prevent any more bugs from getting in.

The woman who had laid out the plates poured Chagum a glass of fruit juice. She poured a little too much; some spilled on the table below his glass. She paid the mess no mind and kept setting out dishes.

Chagum had to eat first; Hugo and Sodok could only eat their meal after he was finished. Chagum selected a little of everything from the serving dishes, said a prayer to the gods and tried to eat quickly.

Hugo stared intently at the table. A number of those strange insects that had flown into the room had dropped dead. Some still flew around the meat, but every insect that had landed in the spilled fruit juice on the table was dead. The spilled juice was mostly hidden under Chagum's plate, so it was harder for Chagum to notice this than Hugo.

When Chagum finished eating, he reached for the fruit juice.

"Your Majesty," Hugo said. He stood up and pushed down Chagum's extended hand. He frowned down at the dead insects and pointed.

Chagum was briefly stunned, but then he took in what Hugo was pointing at. His face had no expression as he asked, "Poison?"

"Probably."

Sodok stood up, came to Hugo's side and looked over his shoulder. He nodded to Hugo.

Hugo drew his sword from his belt, crossed the room and opened the door. He whispered something to Chagum's guards, then stalked down the hallway toward the kitchen.

When he opened the kitchen door, the workers looked up at him in alarm. "Who were the last people to send food from this place?" he asked. "Tell me their names."

Everyone looked toward a man who was standing near the roast in the center of the kitchen.

When the man saw Hugo, he picked up a butcher knife and hurled it directly at him. Hugo avoided the knife, but the kitchen devolved into chaos; many of the staff fled through the open door behind Hugo.

The man who had thrown the knife watched Hugo approach, then shrank back from him and darted through the workers' exit along the kitchen's back wall. Hugo followed him, but he was surprisingly fast; by the time Hugo made it outside, the man had vanished into the darkness.

Hugo didn't see much point in chasing him. The poisoning attempt had failed; that was sufficient for now. He already knew who had given the man his orders.

When Hugo returned to Chagum's room, the soldiers, Sodok, and Chagum himself all appeared incredibly nervous.

"There was a spy mixed in with the kitchen staff," Hugo said.

The guards gripped their drawn swords tighter. "Should we give chase?" one guard asked.

Hugo shook his head. "He probably had a horse waiting. We'll have to do poison taste-testing from now on. And we should probably send some men ahead to scout the inns we'll be stopping at to make sure they're safe."

The guards nodded.

Hugo approached Chagum and bowed deeply. "I wasn't careful enough. Please forgive me, Your Majesty."

"It's all right. I should have been more on my guard, too," Chagum said. He hadn't considered the possibility that his life would be targeted during the journey, but he should have remembered from his old life

that assassination was always a possibility. "Who tried to kill me? Do you know?"

Hugo took a seat near him and said, "The Nanyoku. That's the southern army of Talsh. It was probably them who sent the poisoner."

Chagum pictured a map of Talsh in his mind. Prince Raul was the Emperor's second son. His older brother, Hazar, must command the southern army. Chagum's pale lips twitched upward in a slight smile.

"So the older brother wanted to take the prize away from his little brother? I guess that should tell me what I'm worth to them."

When Hugo didn't say anything, Sodok ventured, "We're not operating secretly anymore. Maybe they were waiting for us to come out in the open to make a move."

Chagum nodded. He was an important bargaining chip that the Talsh intended to use to conquer New Yogo. If Prince Raul allowed Chagum to be killed, he would certainly earn the Emperor's ire. On the flip side, Prince Raul would be greatly rewarded for bringing Chagum in safely. It was in Prince Hazar's best interests to kill Chagum, either through poison or some kind of accident.

Do Talsh's princes always fight among themselves like this? Chagum wondered. It seemed that the princes weren't cooperating on the invasion of the northern continent. In fact, they seemed to be at odds. Could Chagum use that somehow? Chagum sighed and smoothed his expression so that he wouldn't betray his thoughts.

"It's a shame," Chagum said with a little sigh. "I'm so thirsty."

Sodok grinned, then gave the guards a signal. They went to the kitchen and retrieved a glass of water for Chagum to drink. Chagum lifted his face covering slightly and took slow sips of the water until he could convince himself that it wasn't poisoned, too.

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Some days later, Chagum's cart reached the Arou mountain range. The road that cut through the mountains was well-maintained and easy to traverse. Perhaps Chagum should have been impressed, but all he

could think of was what Hugo had told him about Talsh's slow method of taking over nations by making them crumble away, bit by slow bit.

Chagum expected it to get warmer as they traveled south, but the cold air blowing over the mountains only got stronger. At an inn in the mountains, every room had its own separate fireplace, but Chagum's feet and hands tingled with the cold even when he stretched out right next to the fire. Had he gotten used to the heat of Sangal and the tropical countries? He didn't ever remember being so cold before. He spent his nights wrapped in thick blankets while shivering from head to toe.

One night, Hugo knocked on his door. "Excuse me. May I come in?"

When Chagum nodded, the guard standing at the end of his bed opened the door and let Hugo in. Hugo was carrying a thick quilted blanket stuffed with cotton. He spread it over Chagum and tucked in the edges.

"I hope this will help you sleep, Your Majesty," he said. "The inn's workers looked all over for an extra blanket and gave us this one."

After a few moments spent under the thick blanket, Chagum felt himself warming up.

Hugo bowed and excused himself. "Sleep well, Your Majesty." He left the room.

Chagum closed his eyes, feeling much more comfortable than he had a few minutes before.

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Chagum sat on his leather-covered seat in the horse-drawn cart watching speckled sunlight dance through the leaves overhead. As always, he took in this view alone.

Chagum found the journey by cart to be very lonely, especially compared to his sea voyage. Hugo, Sodok and his guards usually rode outside the cart, so he didn't have many opportunities to talk to people.

Chagum mostly just looked out of his window and watched the scenery, which changed slowly as the days passed.

Whenever he waved or smiled at Hugo, all he did was look down. As Chagum watched Hugo maneuver his horse under the bright light of the sun, he found himself wondering which road Hugo was following. He had begged Chagum to save his people. Those words had almost sounded like a prayer. Hugo had watched his own city burn. Chagum thought about how difficult it must have been to survive in a country that had been destroyed by war.

He also wondered what Hugo thought of him. Did Hugo see him as New Yogo's Crown Prince, an inexperienced boy, or a little of both? Or did he see something else entirely? Chagum still didn't know exactly what Hugo was expecting of him. He certainly wanted Chagum to save New Yogo's people, but Chagum would never be able to kill his father and becoming a Talsh puppet would be worse than dishonorable. Still, Hugo seemed to think there was a way.

Chagum felt like a tiny tributary feeding into an enormous river. He was getting sucked into other people's plans and intentions like water into a raging stream. He still didn't have a complete picture of what might happen in the future.

Chagum thought about the people in his life that had put him on his current path. He shifted in his seat and felt it skid a little on the floor of the cart as his memory wandered in the direction of his distant homeland and all the people he'd left behind. He'd been taken such a long time ago. He hoped his mother was all right; he also hoped that the ships of New Yogo's navy had made it home safely and that the flagship's prisoners were safe. Shuga was probably in a terribly vulnerable position at court with Chagum gone. Shuga never thought of himself first, so Chagum prayed, though without much hope, that Shuga was working for himself for a change.

I wonder what my father is thinking now.

When the Mikado heard what had happened in Sangal, what would he do? He couldn't make Tugum the Crown Prince without confirmation that Chagum was dead. The uncertainty of the current

situation probably vexed him. Maybe he was praying for news of Chagum's death even now.

Thinking of such things made Chagum's heart hurt. He felt like he was wandering in darkness with his feet stuck in the mud. No way out and no way through.

His father felt nothing but hatred for him. The Mikado's prayers might soon be answered: Chagum might die. His father had given explicit orders to assassinate him before, not once but twice: Jin and Yun had been sent to kill him on his sea voyage.

Chagum's heart felt like it was being skewered with countless tiny needles. His face contorted in pain. *Why does it hurt so much?*

His father was heartless enough to order the assassination of his own child. Such heartlessness did not augur well for the people of New Yogo in the coming war. Chagum was motivated to do whatever he could to save his people, but he wasn't his father; there were some lines that he couldn't cross.

Chagum surrendered himself to the rocking of the cart, looked out at the trees and tried to overcome the pain in his heart.

I don't want to kill my father.

Not just that: Chagum didn't want to kill anyone, period. He never wanted to be responsible for another person losing their life.

But he might not have a choice. A future without bloodshed was probably just a dream. No matter what he did, Talsh would come to devour New Yogo with their greed and insatiable desire for conquest. His people would suffer because of the Talsh: there was no way around that. But Chagum refused to accept that he was helpless. There had to be something that he could do.

Maybe he'd think of something when he finally met Prince Raul. He was eager to understand why someone would order the destruction of a nation and the deaths of countless people. Prince Raul must have his reasons; Chagum wanted to hear them.

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The cart suddenly slowed down. Chagum pitched forward and was shaken from his thoughts. The cart crossed a rough patch of road and turned onto a different path. He heard voices crying out ahead of the cart.

The cart kept jerking forward by fits and starts until it finally stopped completely. Chagum leaned out of his window to take a better look at what was happening.

"Please stay inside and don’t look," one of the Talsh soldiers said. He tried to close Chagum’s window from the outside, but Chagum held it open with both hands.

A huge crowd of people from Orm were gathered on the side of the road. A procession of Talsh cavalrymen were riding by. Wagons were interspersed sporadically through the procession. Chagum noticed that most of the people gathered on the roadside were weeping.

Is that a coffin in that wagon? Is this a funeral?

There was a flag flying from the nearest wagon. Chagum didn't recognize it, but he guessed that it was the flag of Orm.

"Forgive me, Your Majesty, but I must close the window," the Talsh soldier said. Another soldier dismounted and helped close the cart's window by force. Chagum clearly wasn't supposed to see this. He guessed that it was a funeral procession for soldiers returning home from war. If that was the case, then Talsh was currently at war with someone.

The voices Chagum was hearing were probably those of friends and relatives calling out the names of the dead. The weeping had definitely gotten louder as Chagum and his escort had approached. The cart he was in flew the flag of the northern army. Seeing that flag had provoked an immediate reaction from all those people. Chagum could easily understand why they hated the Talsh army.

The inside of the cart was much darker with the window closed. Chagum listened to the voices of the mourners and the labored turning of the cart's wheels. The voices washed over the cart like a torrent, no way out and no way through.

Chagum understood, now, what being conquered by the Talsh actually meant. The Talsh sacrificed thousands of lives in war, then recruited thousands more soldiers in the lands they conquered. It was an endless cycle of violence and killing.

If New Yogo didn't surrender, its people would be slaughtered. But if they did surrender, the people would still be slaughtered in wars against other nations. This was another effect of Talsh's slow method of assimilating conquered nations.

The shadow of the soldiers' funeral procession fell across Chagum's heart. He'd only glimpsed it briefly, but he was certain he would never forget it.

Chapter 3 - Rain in the Imperial Capital

Chagum passed through the Gate of the Sun leading into the Talsh capital of Rahan on a day of rain.

"It's been years since it rained in Rahan," Sodok muttered. "Weird."

A thin mist covered the city like a shroud. Chagum stared silently and took it all in. Even blurred by darkness and cold fog, Chagum could tell that the city was beautiful.

He saw water flowing through aqueducts and thought it looked like a man-made river. White flowers lined the street on both sides. More flowers of various colors bloomed brightly in planter windows. The buildings were all wide, tall, and made of the same kind of stone that Chagum had seen at Manon. There were few people on the street due to the rain, so Chagum could easily see how neat and orderly everything was.

Hugo was outside Chagum's horse-drawn cart riding on his own separate horse. He remembered the first time he'd come to Rahan. Then as now, he had ridden in on a horse. The hugeness of the city had oppressed him like an enormous weight. He was still discomfited by the city's size; coming back always surprised him a little. Kosenkyo was only about a tenth the size of Rahan.

The lower city of Rahan wasn't served by the aqueducts; Hugo hoped that the people who lived there would be able to fill their rain barrels today.

Hugo wondered what Chagum was thinking now. When he glanced at him through the cart's window, his expression was as still and unreadable as a statue's. Maybe he couldn't see much because of how dark the sky was; his face was still mostly covered. Hugo thought he looked a little paler than usual.

As the cart progressed further into the city, something in Chagum's demeanor changed. He appeared strong-willed and willing to fight—for what, Hugo wasn't sure. His grim expression conveyed his understanding that the lives of all of New Yogo's people rested on his shoulders. Hugo pulled up on his reins to quicken the horse's pace and ran ahead of the cart until he couldn't see Chagum anymore.

Chagum was smart, brave, and kind-hearted. In a more peaceful time, he might have become a wise ruler, beloved by his people. Hugo closed his eyes for a few moments.

Prince Raul was a terrifying man. He cared little for himself or his own advancement, but rewarded those who served him well with easy generosity. He also cared little for convention or tradition; the policies he favored were all ones that he considered the most profitable and advantageous, not just for himself but for the empire. He was relentless in pursuit of his goals. If he had to sacrifice the lives of tens of thousands of men to get what he wanted, he would do so without an instant of hesitation.

Crown Prince Chagum was not capable of successfully opposing such a man.

Still, Hugo felt sure that Chagum was going to try. Not for his own sake, but for the sake of saving his nation. Chagum would do everything he could to keep his people safe.

But any road Chagum chose would end in bloodshed. If he chose to rule over his nation as a puppet of the Talsh, the destruction of New Yogo would be slower, but it would still happen.

Hugo's dark eyes remained fixed on the road ahead. There were times when survival demanded sacrifice. Chagum was still a boy and cared sincerely about others, but as he grew older, he would become as jaded as every other politician that Hugo had met.

Cold rain misted over Hugo's face as the Talsh Emperor's palace came into view. The forest below the palace was a pale spring green; he could tell at a glance that it was as scrupulously tended as always. The forest was considered somewhat small, but Hugo knew that it was about the same size as the imperial palace in Kosenkyo.

The weather started clearing up. Weak sunlight cut through the tree cover and shone down on the forest road. When Hugo looked up, he saw the magnificent Sun Palace of the Emperor of Talsh looming overhead, eclipsing his entire field of vision. Several smaller palaces surrounded it on every side; these were the residences of the Emperor's family.

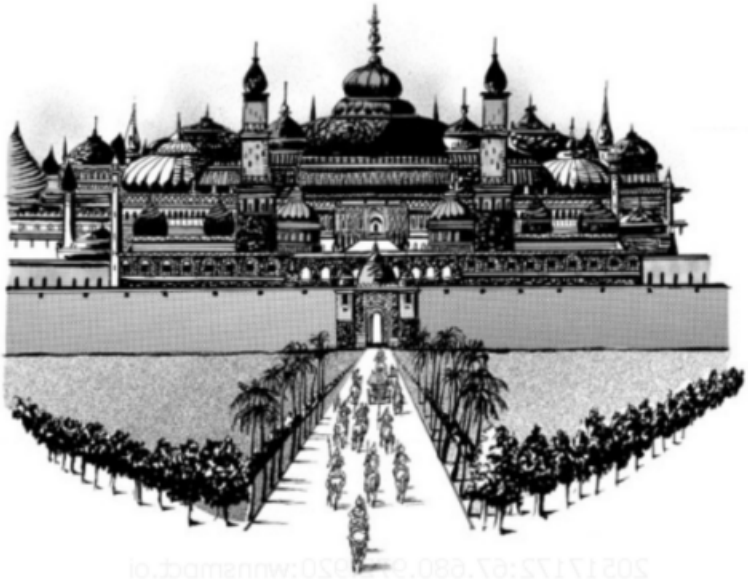
When Chagum caught his first glimpse of the Sun Palace, his eyes went wide. The walls and towers were shiny from the rain and gleamed bright white.

The walls look like they're made of snow.

He'd seen this kind of stone before; it came from a place to the north of the Misty Blue Mountains in the land of Kanbal. The stone was very rare and tremendously expensive, but it seemed that the Talsh had built an entire palace out of it.

Thinking of Kanbal reminded Chagum of Balsa. He rested his head against his windowpane. Balsa would never believe it if he told her where he was going now; he scarcely believed it himself. The idea that he would ever make such a journey had never occurred to him as a child.

An elaborate gate decorated with gold and gems came into view on the road ahead. This must be the outer gate of the palace. The people inside could probably see Chagum approach from their high vantage point. He saw riders coming out to meet them. The day before yesterday, most of Chagum's guards had ridden ahead to announce his arrival; he saw some of them in the group of riders emerging from the other side of the palace's gate.



"Welcome to Rahan, Crown Prince Chagum," one of the riders called out. He looked at Hugo. "I'll be guiding you from here with your

permission, toruan. The Crown Prince shall be staying the guest palace, Rai Kol, which is to the southeast of the northern palace, Kal Gol. These orders come from the northern army's High Commander, Kurz."

Hugo frowned slightly, but he nodded in acknowledgement of the orders. The mounted soldiers passed under the palace gate and vanished from view.

Sodok looked up at Kal Gol, the northern palace. "Hm. They've stopped flying the flag of the hawk."

Chagum looked askance at Sodok.

"That means that Prince Raul is currently absent from the palace," Sodok said. "He left his High Commander in charge of what to do with us until he returns."

Chagum frowned. "Prince Raul isn't here? Why not?"

Sodok smiled slightly. "Prince Raul is often absent. He helps keep the peace in Talsh's territories and conquered nations. I suppose that would be a strange thing for a prince to do in New Yogo.

"Still, this works out in your favor. You'll be able to rest from your journey before meeting Prince Raul." Sodok looked at Hugo, who was a little ahead of the cart.

Hugo's expression was ashen. Chagum suddenly felt a lot more nervous. What kind of person was High Commander Kurz? Chagum had never even heard of him before, but Hugo's entire attitude had changed when he'd heard Kurz's name.

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Flowers bloomed on both sides of the road that led to the palace. The cart passed through a large park, then stopped directly in front of the palace gate. The palace had so many towers that it was hard for Chagum to count them all. Each one was topped by a black, rounded cupola that reflected the sunlight. The ridge of the palace roof was decorated with a pattern of ivy leaves embossed in gold.

Chagum's escort stopped right in front of the gate. Only warriors of the highest rank, Haku Ul, were permitted to pass through.

Chagum closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened his eyes again, he didn't look at the gate. He listened to it open and felt the cart lurch into motion.

Chapter 4 - The Palace of the Poisonous Spider

After Chagum's cart entered the palace complex from the front gates, it turned sharply to the southeast where the palace for Talsh guests of state were located.

The guest palace, Rai Kol, was decorated in pale green and yellow on the inside. The ceiling was so high that it made Chagum dizzy to look up at it; part of it was domed in clear glass that caught and refracted the sunlight into rainbow colors. The rug on the floor was yellow; it was woven in a complex non-repeating pattern.

A wide hallway extended straight ahead from the entrance hall. Both the entrance hall and the hallway were lit by many extravagant-looking lamps.

Chagum stared at the walls as if he'd been hypnotized. He didn't understand how anything he was seeing was made; it was all too unfamiliar. The yellow rug extended from the entrance hall into the hallway in one long line, making the space seem even bigger than it was.

There was a man standing in the hall. He was definitely Talsh; his skin was reddish gold in the sunlight and his bright hair hung to his shoulders. He was an older man, but his gaze and his posture were both alert. His clothes were so dark that they appeared black, but his raised collar was decorated with gold.

The man took a single step forward and bowed. "Welcome to the Talsh empire, Crown Prince Chagum. My name is Akura Kurz. I am the High Commander of the northern army of Talsh. I have been selected to protect the northern palace of Kal Gol until Prince Raul's return.

"You must be tired from your long journey. Please feel free to make use of this guest palace as you see fit. Would you like a hot bath? A

meal? Please rest for a time, and then we can discuss the reasons for your visit."

Kurz said all of this in the Talsh language. When he glanced at Hugo, Hugo started translating his words into Yogoese. Chagum stared straight at Kurz for the duration of his greeting, then nodded shallowly and walked away from him.

Kurz was clearly bewildered at such a casual disregard, but he quickly composed himself and walked after Chagum. Kurz pointed out features of the guest palace as Chagum passed them by.

At the end of the hallway, there were five women kneeling down on the ornate yellow rug.

"These servants shall see to your comfort," Kurz said; Hugo translated. "Simply give them a command, and they will do it." Kurz bowed and walked toward the entrance of the guest palace.

"Well then," Hugo said, "I guess my work here is done." He smiled at Chagum, then bowed his head solemnly. "Try to be comfortable here. The servants can show you where the baths are."

Chagum looked straight at Hugo's deeply tanned face. He looked like he wanted to say something else, but he remained silent.

The servants came closer to Chagum with their eyes cast down. One asked if they could help him remove his traveling clothes. When he nodded, she started removing his cloak.

Hugo bowed to Chagum. "Kurz didn't tell you this, but he's fluent in Yogoese. It was the northern army that attacked and burned Yogo under his command." Hugo turned on his heel and withdrew.

I wonder what reason Kurz has for speaking the Talsh language instead of Yogoese. Does he want to try and learn my secrets? Or was the point to force Hugo to translate?

If Kurz had commanded Hugo to translate, then that was cruel. Chagum didn't like to think about what he might be capable of. The woman who was removing his cloak started trembling slightly after Hugo left.

Kurz had probably ordered these women to spy on Chagum. They would report Chagum and Hugo's conversation, too; they had no choice.

Hugo was from Yogo; if Kurz suspected that he was a traitor, he could probably order Hugo killed. Hugo had every reason to want revenge against Kurz.

These walls have ears. I should think of everyone here as a spy.

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When Kurz heard Hugo walking behind him in the guest palace's hallway, he stopped and turned around. "Splendid work, Hugo Arayutan."

Hugo bowed his head. "Thank you, sir. I was lucky."

Kurz nodded. "But you couldn't have achieved this with luck alone. I'm sure Prince Raul will give you a generous reward. You may even be granted your own castle and set upon the noble path of light, A Tal."

Hugo made no attempt to conceal his surprise. A Tal, the path of light, was usually reserved for Talsh nobility; if Hugo was set on that path, he would be able to request an audience with the Talsh Emperor or Princes at any time.

Other rights and privileges would be granted to him by the Talsh Emperor as well. If he continued to serve the empire well, he might be promoted to the same class as Kurz and become a High Commander in the Talsh army. This was the first step to being able to influence Talsh's government and policies directly.

It feels like a door has opened somewhere. Hugo was deeply moved.

Kurz was smiling at him with cold and forbidding eyes. "I'd advise you to be especially mindful of your conduct from here on out. If your excuse for bringing Crown Prince Chagum to Yogo is found lacking, the path of your entire life may change."

Hugo lifted his head and said, "I'll keep that in mind."

The gleam in Kurz's eyes was hard like steel. "Neither you nor Sodok are permitted to approach Crown Prince Chagum until after Prince Raul returns."

Hugo stared at Kurz and didn't say a word.

"Prince Raul desires Crown Prince Chagum to feel helpless. Do you understand?" Kurz asked.

"Yes."

Kurz dismissed Hugo with a wave of his hand. "Be on your way, then. You may be summoned soon, so don't go far."

Hugo bowed and walked past Kurz in the hallway.

Kurz expects to weaken Crown Prince Chagum's resolve.

Waiting for Prince Raul to return would certainly be an exercise in patience: Chagum would be isolated and alone in an enemy's palace for all that time. Hugo wasn't even allowed to go near him.

Hugo smiled slightly. Did Kurz really expect something like that to work? All Crown Prince Chagum needed to do was sit still and not move. Maybe Kurz should have challenged him to a staring contest before resorting to such cheap tactics.

There was no avoiding what would happen next. War was coming: sparks were being kindled into flames; soon, the Talsh would conquer another kingdom. But all this politicking and unrest on the southern continent was definitely slowing Talsh down. It would be better for the entire army to cooperate in the invasion of the north rather than indulging in petty squabbles and mind games, but that probably wasn't possible. Talsh suffered from internal dissension just like any other nation—and treating Crown Prince Chagum badly would do little to influence his decisions.

Kurz was a keenly perceptive man, but this quality made him disdainful of other people; he usually underestimated them. Hugo considered that Kurz's only real weakness.

I doubt Kurz will be able to intimidate Crown Prince Chagum.

If Chagum managed to survive this test, he might yet grow up to be a force to be reckoned with. Hugo doubted that Prince Raul would permit such an outcome, though.

I'll probably never get to speak to you again, Crown Prince Chagum. But I'll always be watching.

Hugo quickened his pace as he walked down the hall.

Chapter 5 - Voices Crying Out

The bathhouse of the guest palace was called Afal Ran. When his attendants guided Chagum there for the first time, he couldn't believe his eyes. The place didn't look like a bathing area; it was almost large enough to be a receiving hall. The floor was dotted with richly embroidered cushions stuffed with something soft like cotton. Ten young women were reclining on these cushions. They rose when Chagum entered, but kept their eyes cast down.

Were all these women bath attendants? There were dressed in white in Yogo-style dresses and sashes. Their face coverings were held in place by white headbands. Chagum couldn't see their eyes or noses, only their mouths. Their attire reminded him somewhat of the bath attendants he'd had in in the imperial palace in Kosenkyo, but all of those attendants had been boys.

The women's clothing was made of a thinner material than he was used to seeing. The bath attendants in New Yogo had a graceful and courteous way of speaking and moving that these women did not imitate. The entire scene was familiar, but unsettling in its differences.

Baths were sacred in New Yogo for their purifying effects on the body and mind. Chagum liked them because baths were a source of quiet, relatively private time.

The women's movements were entirely silent. As soon as they stood up from their cushions, the music of some unfamiliar stringed instrument started playing a subdued and relaxing melody. When Chagum looked up, he saw the tiniest sliver of space like a window carved into the incredibly high ceiling. That must be where the music was coming from.

The women walked as quietly as the wind. They removed Chagum's clothes a piece at a time. They smelled like sweetly aromatic wakura flowers. The touch of their hands was so light that Chagum barely felt them.

When Chagum was stripped all the way down to his undergarments, one of the women tugged on a thin sleeve and guided him through a huge enameled doorway. The next room was warm with steam. It was a bit more difficult to breathe, and even harder to see anything. Chagum started sweating almost immediately. This room was much smaller and narrower than the previous one. There were no windows or clear openings for ventilation except for the door, so the room was dim. Another door shaped like an arch loomed hugely like a gaping maw on the other side of the room; the little illumination that filtered into this room came from there.

The woman who had led Chagum into the steam room suddenly touched his shoulder. In the space of an instant, the other women hovering in the steam room's doorway vanished from sight as if they'd melted into the mist. Chagum looked away from the woman, frowning. Her wet clothes were practically transparent.

"Is the bath through there?" Chagum asked, pointing to the archway on the other side of the room. "If it is, I don't need any more help. I'll go in myself."

The woman maintained her grip on Chagum's shoulder and stepped closer. Her hand slid down to his chest in a soft caress. Chagum looked at her face; he could only see her lips because of the face covering.

She was smiling.

The instant Chagum realized this, he pushed her hand off his chest and stepped back. He was enraged, but he didn't yell. Shock made his heart jump to his throat. Chagum set his jaw and let his anger show clearly in his expression.

He walked toward the next room alone; he hoped the baths were there. None of the bath attendants followed him.

The room on the other side of the large archway was lit by a golden glow. It was another enormous space; the ceiling was domed and full of tiny, uniform holes that looked a little like stars in a night sky. Steam filled the air in here, too, but it was thinner; Chagum had no difficulty breathing. The quality of the light from above revealed that it was close to sunset.

There was only one bath in this room, but it was large enough to fit a hundred bathers easily. The tub and the walls were patterned with seashells that gleamed softly in the low light. The bath was full of hot water.

Chagum's nerves were raw, but being able to take deep breaths helped ease some of his lingering outrage. He removed the rest of his clothes, rinsed himself off with warm water from a bucket, then slid into the enormous bath. The water was hotter and somehow softer than he was expecting. The soles of his feet felt like they were being supported by pillows. When he looked down, he saw a fine layer of tiny bubbles forming over his feet and calves. The bottom of the tub felt very strange; the bubbles were so thick that he couldn't see what it was made of. Maybe something had been done to the floor so that people wouldn't slip and fall.

Chagum ducked his head underwater. When he surfaced, something at the edge of the tub caught his eye. It looked like a simple bar of soap at first glance, but when he looked again, he noticed that it had been carved with an intricate pattern of red flowers. It was hard to believe that something so delicate and fine could be handmade. The soap sculpture would be destroyed as it was used. As Chagum traced the carved edges of the soap with his hands, he realized that the pattern on the soap matched the pattern carved into the edge of the tub perfectly. The carving was so fine and delicate that it must have been done with tools as fine and precise as a sewing needle.

Chagum looked around the room in awe. Now that his eyes were used to the steam and the gloom, he could tell that the walls and even the ceiling were decorated the same way as the tub and the soap. How many people had it taken to create everything in this single room?

Chagum suspected that this palace had been built more recently than the imperial palace in Kosenkyo. Its hugeness and the intricacy of its design and building must have required countless workers, engineers, architects and artisans. He wondered how long it would take for all of the people who lived and worked in the Second Palace to accomplish such a feat.

The Talsh empire had resources beyond Chagum's wildest imaginings. As he stared at the bathroom's walls, he remembered the woman who'd smiled at him. The Talsh clearly considered him naïve and immature; easy to sway or seduce. He couldn't shake the sense that the woman had been mocking him in some way.

Chagum knew that it was customary for Yogoese princes to take women to their beds at the age of seventeen, even women who weren't their wives, but Chagum considered such a practice degrading. Did the Talsh usually welcome foreign guests in this way? When Prince Raul learned that he'd refused the woman, he'd probably laugh at him for being too young or too prudish.

I don't really care. I am who I am.

Chagum rested his head against the edge of the bathtub. The steam sparkled and glinted in the air. As his eyes adjusted to the early evening light, he saw that there was gold embedded in the walls as well.

It's only natural to be stunned by all this wealth. Talsh definitely isn't boring.

He remembered the cries of grief and pain that he'd heard on his journey to Rahan. He could almost hear them now, echoing deafeningly in the vast room like the roar of a raging stream. He closed his eyes and wrapped himself in the sound as if it were a shroud.

Chagum stretched out completely in the bath with his eyes still closed. He wanted to fight—suddenly, more than anything else, that was what Chagum wanted to do. He knew that he was only one person, but there was something strong and unbroken at the core of himself. The more threatened he felt, the stronger he became.

He was the Crown Prince of a small nation that had never known war. Prince Raul probably outmatched him in every way.

But even so, power wasn't the arbiter of everything. There was more than one way to measure a person's strength. Chagum was essentially a prince without a country at the moment, but he had still sailed over the ocean and crossed mountains to come here. He might have been bodily kidnapped, but no one could take away his dignity or his belief in

himself. He wasn't even wearing the clothes that usually proclaimed his rank right now. He was himself, naked, bare—and strong.

Even if he was forced to bow before the Talsh to prevent New Yogo's destruction, his essential self would remain unbroken and unbowed.

Chagum opened his eyes and stood up so fast that he splashed water everywhere.

Chapter 6 - The World Above the Walls

Prince Raul returned to the Talsh Sun Palace on Chagum's third morning spent in confinement. It had rained all through the previous night; when Chagum looked out of his windows in the morning, it was still raining. The sky was dark with thick clouds. Chagum would be granted an audience with Prince Raul sometime in the afternoon.

After the audience was arranged, Chagum sat near a window and looked outside. He'd dreamed about Shuga. They'd been discussing something, but he couldn't remember what. When he'd awakened, all he'd felt was the lingering ache of homesickness.

I wish Shuga were here. I'm sure he'd have some idea of what to do.

Chagum closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Shuga had taught Chagum everything he knew about diplomacy and negotiation. That knowledge would certainly be useful to him now. He wouldn't falter here no matter what. He had to understand what kind of person Prince Raul was and what his intentions were for the conquered New Yogo in no uncertain terms.

But he couldn't push too hard in negotiations with Prince Raul. Chagum being here was something of a double-edged sword: if Prince Raul gained his cooperation on roughly equal terms, then New Yogo would be absorbed into the Talsh empire with only a limited amount of Talsh resources and little to no loss of life. But if Chagum negotiated badly here and came off as weak or ineffectual, he was sure that Prince Raul would pounce on that weakness. He didn't think Prince Raul expected that outcome. It wouldn't work in his favor if Chagum were deemed incompetent; Prince Raul had brought him all this way. If Chagum wound up being useless to him, then Prince Raul would have wasted a lot of resources and time.

Chagum chose to believe that Prince Raul wanted to try taking over New Yogo without bloodshed first. Why else would Chagum be

secluded here, waiting to be used as the decisive game piece that would deliver New Yogo into Talsh hands, if only to save it from destruction?

Chagum clenched his fists. He refused to be used like this. There had to be other options.

Shuga, wherever you are, I hope you're praying for me.

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A messenger arrived from the Sun Palace and announced that it was time for Chagum's audience with Prince Raul. As Chagum walked down the wide halls of the Sun Palace, all he could hear was the measured thumping of his own heart. Chagum and the messenger stopped before a huge door. Dim white light shone down on them from the hallway's lamps.

Two armed imperial guards opened the door for Chagum and the messenger, then closed it behind them. The room Chagum entered was as large as the other Talsh spaces he'd seen. It was lit like the hallway with the pale white light, though most of the illumination came from the room's large stained glass windows instead of lamps. The sky outside the windows threatened rain. The quality of the light revealed that it was some time past noon.

In the middle of the room there was a raised platform with stairs on two sides of it. The platform held an enormous throne that looked more like a bench than a single seat. A somewhat short and compactly built man reclined on this throne with one elbow supported on an armrest. There was a sheathed sword on a pedestal next to the throne, within easy reach of the man's right hand.

Prince Raul.

Chagum faced the throne and stepped onto the room's carpet, which was blue and embroidered with a pattern in gold. He walked directly toward Prince Raul and stopped before the raised platform. As he neared Prince Raul, Chagum noticed Kurz sitting in a smaller but just as elaborate throne just below the platform on his right side. Hugo stood behind Kurz's throne.

Chagum didn’t even glance at Kurz or Hugo; he kept his focus on Raul. He walked to the very edge of the blue-and-gold carpet runner in front of the platform and stopped. One of the room’s guards fetched him a chair, but he declined to sit.

Prince Raul laid stretched out on the bench-like throne with his face resting against his hand, appearing entirely at ease. He watched Chagum approach from his high vantage point. He wasn’t smiling, but Chagum thought he saw a hint of mirth in Prince Raul’s eyes.

"Please take a seat, Crown Prince Chagum," Prince Raul said.

Chagum didn’t move.

Prince Raul shifted slightly and sat up. "Hm. I forgot that you don’t speak our language. Hugo, translate for me."

Hugo bowed, then translated what Prince Raul had said into the polite register of Yogoese.

Chagum still didn’t move.

Prince Raul’s eyebrows went up. "So you won’t sit?"

Chagum nodded. "I would like us to speak to one another on equal terms."

When Hugo translated Chagum’s words, Prince Raul grinned. The light in his eyes was cold and sharp like ice.

"It’s obvious that you’re in an inferior position here, Crown Prince Chagum. You’re here to beg for mercy, after all."

Chagum’s eyes flashed. "I have not come to beg for mercy."

As Prince Raul listened to Hugo’s translation, he picked up the sword on the pedestal next to him, then struck the pedestal with the sword, still sheathed. The sound of the strike echoed through the room. The guards standing near the door stood up straighter.

Prince Raul got lazily to his feet. His eyes shone with an inner light as he gazed down upon Crown Prince Chagum. "Since I claimed victory in Sangal’s war and managed to get my hands on you, my reputation has improved. My father, the Emperor, has given me total authority over the invasion of the northern continent. If I order it, two hundred thousand Talsh soldiers will sail to New Yogo, burn your country to the ground, and kill everyone they see."

Prince Raul sounded bored. "That's not a boast or a threat. I don't hesitate to kill infants and children when I see a need. Does that appall you? For your foolish act of pointless resistance, I could order your family's palace burned. Maybe I'll have the soldiers cut your mother's ears off and sever all of your little sister's limbs while you watch and listen to their screams. You have no way to defend them—or yourself. New Yogo knows nothing of war.

"I think we could take over Kosenkyo—call it three months from now. I'm sure your people will put up some resistance, but all that would lead to is suffering and death."

Prince Raul's expression was chilling. Chagum kept his eyes on him and didn't flinch, but he had to suppress a full-body shiver as Prince Raul kept speaking.

Prince Raul stood high over Chagum and asked, "Despite all this, you say that you have not come to beg for mercy?" He used the same tone as he might to throw a dog a bone.

He didn't need to say anything more. Chagum understood that Prince Raul had just obliterated all hope of keeping New Yogo safe and free as casually as snipping a thread. This was the first time Chagum had ever bargained for the life and soul of his nation. He took a deep breath, gathered his courage and said, "You ask strange questions, Prince Raul. Did you only bring me here to get me to beg for mercy?"

Prince Raul frowned. "What is your meaning?"

"Mercy is for when your opponent is weak and pitiable. I only answered as I did so that we could negotiate country to country, as the representatives of our own nations. I don't understand the intent behind your questions."

Prince Raul's eyes narrowed, but they were no longer cold or forbidding. He snorted. "Negotiation is for opponents of equal standing. The gap in power between us is too large. Isn't offering someone in a worse position an advantageous compromise essentially mercy?"

Chagum answered without hesitation: "Perhaps, but I don't think you would have brought me here unless there was something you wanted from me. That's what we're negotiating here, Prince Raul."

Prince Raul blinked, then laughed reflexively like he couldn't help it. He took quick steps down the stairs of the platform and came down to Chagum's level. His leather boots squeaked on the bare floor as he approached. He placed himself directly in front of Chagum, then rested his chin in one hand.

"Come with me," Prince Raul said. "There's something I want to show you."

Prince Raul passed by Chagum's side. Chagum thought that he seemed excited about something. His aura was like the resonating boom of thunder after a lightning strike.

Chagum followed after Prince Raul without saying a word. They crossed the receiving hall quickly, then entered the hallway and turned right. The next room over from the hall appeared to be some kind of office or administrative space. The office's width was quite narrow compared to the receiving hall, but it was a very, very long room; Chagum couldn't see the far wall from where he stood.

The dark gray sky was visible from the office's high windows. It looked like it was raining. Near the center of the room, Prince Raul stopped moving and turned to face Chagum. He pointed to the wall above the room's entrance.

When Chagum turned to look, his eyes went wide. An enormous map was drawn on the wall. At the very top of the map, Chagum saw the Nayoro peninsula and the Sangal peninsula running parallel to it. Part of Kanbal and all of Rota were also distinctly visible. Sangal's island chains dotted the Yaltash ocean between the northern and southern continents. Even the smaller nations to the west of Kanbal, about which Chagum knew little, were outlined in painstaking detail.

Chagum's own homeland represented only a tiny corner of this map. Most of the map was comprised of the ocean and the southern continent. Country borders were mostly marked by thin blue lines, but Chagum noticed that some of them were outlined in red.

"The countries marked in blue are part of the Talsh empire," Prince Raul said. "Those marked in red are territories that I govern personally. Take a good, long look. This is the shape of the world as it currently stands." He no longer sounded bored or lazy; his tone was almost cheerful. Hugo continued to translate in a dispassionate tone.

"Sometimes, other nations grow bold. The Aru Jira are a savage race that live in a wasteland desert. Once we lure them out of their lands and destroy them, root and branch, their territory will belong to Talsh as well, though the main benefit to us is that they will no longer be an annoyance.

"The great wasteland is called Oram Hal Ih. Beyond it are the Karzu no Hai—that means 'white mountains' in your language. There are certainly other nations on the other side of those mountains. Many of my men are scouting and searching for them. "

Raul glanced over at Chagum and asked, "Have you ever seen a map like this before?"

Chagum shook his head. "Never. I've never seen anything like this."

"And what do you think, now that you've seen it?"

Chagum gazed in awe at the giant map and told the truth of what he felt: "The world is so huge. I want to see it all."

Prince Raul smiled and said in a tone that was almost friendly, "When I saw this map for the first time when I was ten years old, I though the exact opposite. The world is much too small." His tone carried strong conviction. "There are so few nations left for me to conquer. I still feel dissatisfied now, as I did then."

Chagum faced Prince Raul squarely.

"You're wondering why Talsh would want to keep expanding its borders at all, aren't you?" Prince Raul asked. He was still smiling. "You might say it's inevitable. You and I think differently. Our roles in this discussion are likewise different. Kurz here is the Emperor's right-hand

man. He might try convincing you with some smooth talk or inarguable reasons, but I have no need to speak that way to you."

Prince Raul lifted his hand and pointed to the northern continent. "This is my last prize. By conquering New Yogo, I shall gain a foothold on the northern continent. Then it will only be a matter of time until the nations of the north are outlined in blue ink."

He paused. "I'm guessing that it will take around four years to conquer Kanbal and Rota." Prince Raul explained his plans for conquest as calmly as if he was reading them from a scroll. As Chagum listened, he became convinced that the Talsh invasion strategy would be effective.

Four years. That's all the time that's left.

***

Hugo saw the light leave Chagum's eyes.

Is it over already?

Hugo felt nothing but pity for Chagum. There could be no possibility of equality between Crown Prince Chagum and Second Prince Raul. Chagum had finally realized that. His own nation was a speck on the map compared to the vastness of the Talsh empire. If this were a card game, the Talsh would be cheating: the deck was stacked too much in their favor.

Prince Raul also seemed to sense Chagum's sudden change of heart. He looked extremely pleased with himself as he explained his invasion plan. He rested his hand on Chagum's shoulder and said, "Please don't worry too much, Crown Prince Chagum. I always consider the welfare and happiness of the people conquered by the empire. I'd rather not kill them if I can help it. If they submit to my rule, I will shelter them under my wings and make their lives better and easier. You're seen this with your own eyes during your travels, so you should believe that I'm not lying."

Chagum didn't say anything in response. He simply stared.

Prince Raul gripped Chagum's shoulder and guided him toward a desk. He picked up a sheaf of papers that was stitched together along one edge. "This is my plan for governing New Yogo," he said. "Take a seat there. I'll sit down here and go over it with you."

Prince Raul explained his plan in mixed Yogoese and the Talsh language. He was meticulous and explained everything a page at a time. Hugo stood beside him and translated everything into polite Yogoese.

The plan was incredibly detailed. It encompassed what kind of taxes would be levied after the conquest, and on which goods and which industries. Chagum was drawn in by Prince Raul's clear understanding and care regarding how New Yogo's economy actually worked. Talsh was clearly practiced at integrating smaller nations like New Yogo into their system of government.

"So that's it," Prince Raul said when he reached the last page of the plan. "Do you have any questions?"

Chagum looked Prince Raul in the eyes. "Do you consider the differences that are unique to each nation you conquer? New Yogo's people are not warriors, by and large. The population is quite small in comparison to the larger empire. Paying for war expenditures with high taxes would put an undue burden on them. I would expect them to revolt."

Prince Raul laughed. "You grasp policy implications quickly. I can see how strong-willed you are. But surely paying a tax is a fair enough trade for saving their lives? And there is a way to make the tax burden lighter. They can pay with the voluntary conscription of their fathers and sons into the Talsh army instead of money."

Prince Raul's tone became friendly again. "Well, it seems that you understand our plans well enough. If all goes well, New Yogo will be just another cogwheel in a mechanism, moving along with all the others. If things go really well, it may be permitted to function more or less independently. You can make this easy on yourself...though you might get bored at how easy it would be for you to rule with Talsh support."

Prince Raul set down New Yogo's governance plan and stood up from the desk. "Subjugating Kanbal and Rota will undoubtedly be difficult,

but it should only take a few years. As soon as that's done and over, you and your people will be able to live in peace."

Prince Raul leaned closer to Chagum. "I would make you New Yogo's Mikado. You would still have the right to govern your own people as long as you follow the broad outlines of this plan. And the vast majority of your people would live."

Hugo saw the smile in Prince Raul's eyes.

"I have the support of some very influential people on New Yogo already," Prince Raul said. "Support for you in the imperial palace has understandably waned since your disappearance. I would rather have the support of a Mikado candidate to implement this plan, but it's not impossible with only my current allies. These allies desire you to become the next Mikado as well. Your youth works in your favor. You will have enough time and support to shape New Yogo into a reborn nation, like a cicada emerging from its pod after a long sleep."

Prince Raul was still smiling as he said, "I think the choice here is simple. If the Mikado dies, you're next in line."

Chagum's expression didn't shift, but his lips slowly drained of blood. Prince Raul thought that he was entirely too honest for his position. He was indisputably intelligent, but also entirely unused to cruelty. He didn't want to sully his own hands with something as distasteful as patricide.

Prince Raul brushed his thoughts of Chagum's weakness aside and said, "There's no need to do the deed yourself. Think of it as following the natural order of things. You were always going to be the Mikado after your father, anyway. Like I said before, I doubt you'll find being the Mikado terribly difficult. Open your borders and follow my guidance: that's it. That would lead to the best outcome possible for you and your people.

"The hardest part will probably be getting the other lords and retainers to go along with it all. I'm not expecting that to be easy. But don't worry," Prince Raul said in a reassuring tone. "I've considered that, too. New Yogo has never gone to war. I expect the lords will capitulate after one big battle. They'll be shocked by the difference in

power between themselves and Talsh. I shall seize all the chances I can to demonstrate to your lords why they should support you."

A chill ran up Chagum's spine. His expression nearly shifted, but Prince Raul didn't seem to notice.

"I've planned for every possibility that I could foresee, so I have no concerns. You're smarter than I anticipated, Crown Prince Chagum. I find myself wanting to support you so that you'll do well. You're strangely charismatic. I don't think you'll have any trouble at all turning your people and retainers to your cause."

Prince Raul tapped Chagum's shoulder with his closed fist and laughed. "So let's do our best here. We may be working together for a long time."

Prince Raul paused as if he was expecting a response. When he received none, his eyebrows rose. He was still smiling, but his eyes were cold and unfeeling.

Chagum snapped his mouth firmly shut and stared at Prince Raul in silence for a while. Then he said, "Free the sailors that were made prisoner at Kalsh." His voice was so quiet that it was barely audible.

Prince Raul appeared perplexed.

"Please return those prisoners to me," Chagum went on. "I lost the flagship, so I can't return to New Yogo without them. It would be a disgrace. But if I return with them with me, my father won't be able to dismiss me as easily."

Prince Raul smiled. "I see. That's fine. Let's send you back to New Yogo in triumph, so that your people will see you as a hero. Your father should have no reason to see you as disgraced then."

Prince Raul pushed Chagum's shoulder a bit. "You'll be popular as the Mikado; I can tell."

He dropped his hand from Chagum's shoulder and started walking away. He stopped after a few steps and turned. "Ah. I almost forgot. There is one other thing I wished to discuss."

Prince Raul faced Chagum and said, "You have a younger brother and sister, correct? We can leave your sister alone for the most part. We'll select someone suitable for her to marry. But your younger brother may

cause trouble down the line. It would probably be best to disinherit him before he can challenge your claim to power. He's still quite young, is he not? If he died of a fever at his age, I'm sure no one would find it strange."

Chagum's blood froze to ice. *He wants to kill Tugum, too.* Prince Raul knew about his family. He should have expected that. Army General Radou would certainly try to stand up Tugum as the next Mikado over Chagum once his cooperation with the Talsh became known. He'd neglected to factor Tugum into his own plans; the oversight made Chagum want to kick himself.

Chagum stilled his expression and thought quickly. Even if Tugum could be used against him, Chagum didn't want him to die. He refused to let him be killed.

There must be a way to prevent that. It would have to be something that Prince Raul would agree to.

He searched for a way to save his brother like a mouse seeking a path out of a maze, but the situation seemed hopeless. He wasn't a cruel or cynical person. Going along with Prince Raul's plan was essentially the same as giving the order to kill Tugum and the Mikado himself.

Just when Chagum despaired of ever finding a way out of the maze, he got a flash of inspiration. The path in front of him was suddenly made clear.

Of course. I should have thought of this before.

Chagum looked up at Prince Raul and said, "Make my brother the next Mikado."

For the first time in the entire discussion, Prince Raul appeared genuinely surprised. "What?"

"I want to make Tugum the next Mikado instead of me," Chagum said. "It's a selfish request. I have no desire to be the Mikado. But it also looks better from your side. If I depose my father to become the next Mikado, I'd be perceived as power-hungry and self-interested. But if Tugum becomes the next Mikado instead, no one could accuse me of acting for my own personal gain.

"New Yogo has a long tradition of making only the oldest son the Mikado. Going against that tradition would be ugata kaim—usually forbidden. But New Yogo is about to be remade into something else. Like you, I'm trying to consider every possible situation in order to ensure happiness for my people."

Chagum's nervousness receded as he spoke. He felt like he'd just unwound a particularly complicated knot. "I'll act as co-regent with the Holy Sage until Tugum comes of age at twelve. By that time, most of the difficulties and obstacles we have spoken of should be done and over with. I will begin the difficult work for him, so that he can govern more easily when the time comes."

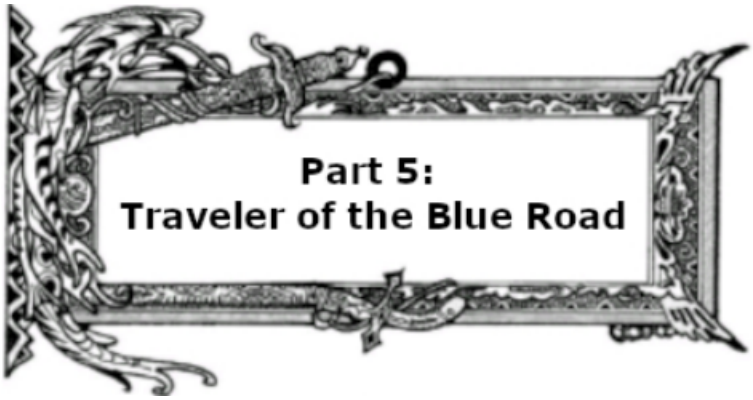
And then…if I survive….I'll run away. I'll run away from the palace.

The thought was vaguely comforting, like warm sunlight on autumn leaves.

Prince Raul was dumbstruck. He looked at Chagum like he couldn't believe his eyes.

"You don't want to rule?"

Chagum smiled at Prince Raul. It was an entirely genuine smile. He was about to get his heart's desire: freedom. "I've never wanted that once in my entire life."



Part 5:
Traveler of the Blue Road

Chapter 1 - Golden Clouds

Chagum stood on the deck of a ship that had been polished to a mirror shine. Below him, sailors scurried back and forth, preparing the ship for departure. When the sailors noticed Chagum standing there, they sent up a deafening cheer.

The sailors had spent a long time in captivity; their exhaustion from the ordeal was obvious. Still, Chagum could see the joy on their faces as they prepared to go home. They had all shaved their beards and cut their hair in anticipation. Everyone looked neat and clean. This felt like a new start.

The face covering Chagum wore fluttered in Sangal's strong sea breeze. A tall Sangalese man stood behind Chagum on the deck; he raised his hands up high to quiet the sailors' cheers.

"Sailors of New Yogo, you are extremely fortunate," he said in accented Yogoese. "After long, *long* negotiations with Sangal's royal family, your Crown Prince has managed to secure your release."

The Yogoese sailors sent up another cheer.

Chagum was lost in his thoughts and barely heard what the Sangalese man said. Prince Raul had given Sangal orders; Chagum also had his own orders to follow.

When the Sangalese man finished his speech and looked toward Chagum, there was a lengthy pause. Then the Sangalese man coughed, bringing Chagum back to the present moment. Chagum looked up at the mast of the ship and the boundless blue sky above it, then took a deep breath of sea air.

When Chagum addressed the sailors, they arranged themselves on the ship's lower deck in neat, orderly lines. They were all present: not a single one was missing. Jin, Tagal and Oru had been sent to a separate island after their attempted escape, but otherwise, everyone had been kept together. Chagum had to squint to find Ruin, but he was there among the sailors near the back of the final line.

Yun hadn’t been permitted to return, though Chagum had asked for his release as well. When Sangal’s royal family had learned from the other sailors that Yun had tried to assassinate Chagum, they’d transferred him to a Sangalese prison.

All of the sailors had recently been sent to the island of Rasu to await Chagum’s arrival. Rasu was a large island with an archipelago of smaller islands surrounding it, much like Kalsh. Rasu had many port cities; Chagum had docked at the one furthest to the south. The Talsh empire had already built a fortress there. More than anything else, that fortress made Chagum remember exactly how much time had passed.

But the shadow of the Talsh had not yet fallen on the north. The sailors on board the ship likely had no idea that the Talsh had already found a way to conquer New Yogo. Part of the reason they’d been permitted to go home was that they’d been kept ignorant. Chagum couldn’t afford to do anything that might jeopardize their safe return to New Yogo.

Grandfather, I’m bringing all our sailors home.

Thinking of Tosa gave him enough courage to speak to the men on the deck below him. "You’ve suffered for such a long time," he said "but we’re finally going home together. Try to remember your families’ faces as you sail; I hope that will make our voyage back to the Nayoro peninsula a little easier."

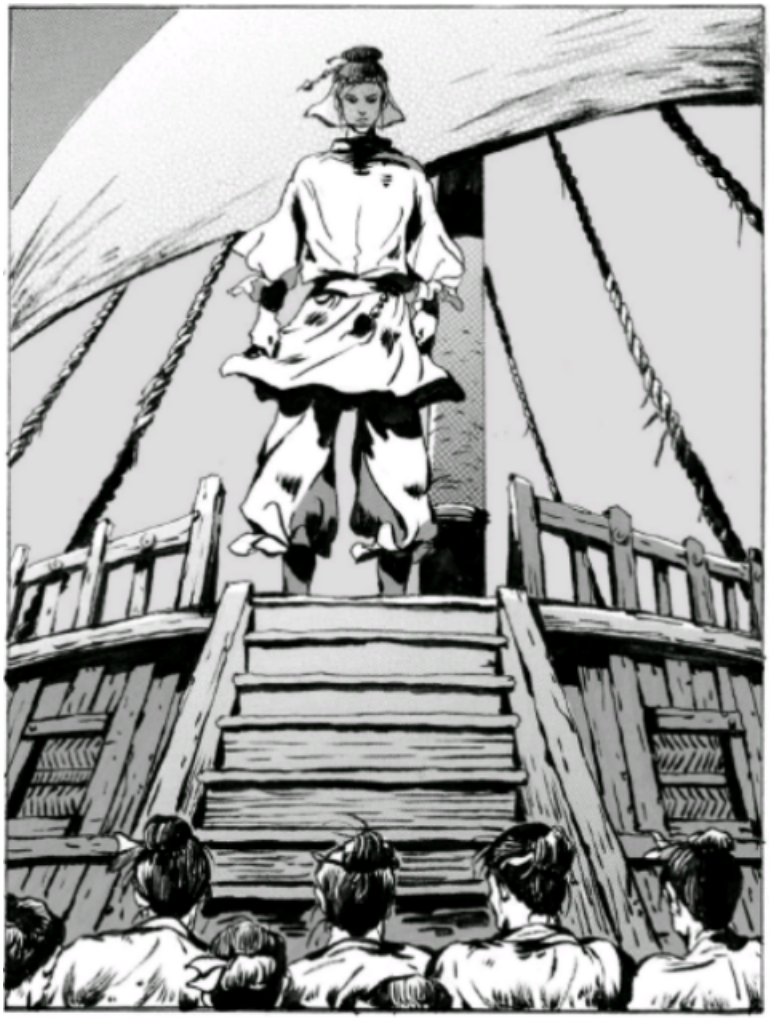
No one cheered. Some of the sailors started crying. They moved together and knelt down together on the deck in a position of prayer.

Chagum’s mouth snapped shut. The men still didn’t understand the reason they’d been saved. He had to tell them.

The sunlight shone so brightly on the freshly polished deck that Chagum almost thought he was seeing a mirage. He turned toward the Sangalese man behind him and said, "Thank you for everything you’ve done."

It was a dismissal, and the man took it as one. He bowed gracefully, then left the ship by passing over a plank connected to the dock. Chagum watched him face his own ship and prepare to board. The man

was the captain of the ship that would follow Chagum and the Yogoese sailors to New Yogo's border.



The captain's ship appeared to be a Sangalese escort, but Chagum knew that the captain had received his orders from Prince Raul. The ship would watch theirs to ensure that Chagum and the sailors returned home directly and didn't try to contact anyone on the way.

Chagum's leash was invisible to the sailors, but he felt its restriction whenever he moved.

When the Sangalese captain was back on his own ship, Chagum addressed the Yogoese sailors again. "Please listen to me carefully," he said.

The sailors rose from their knees and stood at attention.

"There is something that I must tell you. Returning home with me may prove very dangerous. What awaits us when we arrive is not a peaceful reunion, but a violent storm."

The sailors remained completely silent and opened their ears to what their Crown Prince had to say.

"You cheered for me before knowing that I would be leading you into a storm," he said. "The Mikado allowed all of us to be taken captive by Sangal. It seems clear that he abandoned us here. I'm not sure what kind of greeting we'll get when we go home. If the Mikado suspects any of us of colluding with our enemies, we may even be thrown into prison."

None of the sailors stirred. All trace of the previous joy Chagum had seen on their faces while they'd cheered was gone. If he looked closely, he could see signs of tension on many of the men's faces.

Chagum was significantly taller than he'd been the last time the sailors had seen him. He looked like a full-grown adult. There was a shared sense of pride, tinged slightly with sadness, that Crown Prince Chagum was no longer a boy.

"Knowing all this," Chagum said, "are you sure you want to go home? You'd be able to live peacefully in Sangal for a long time if you'd prefer that. There would be no shame in such a decision. If you want to stay here, cross that plank to the dock and your captors will take charge of you once more."

Chagum's eyes scanned the sailors' faces. "If there's anyone who wants to get off the ship, please do so now. Do what your heart tells you. I don't want to cause any more suffering for any of you."

No one spoke or moved. The only sound came from the waves lapping at the ship's hull. Chagum looked out at all the sailors standing at attention with their heads down.

One of the men near the stern of the ship was looking up. He was a young man, clearly a low-ranking sailor; his clothes were brown and unmarked by any insignia. His eyes darted back and forth between his fellow sailors for a few moments. Then he turned toward the sailor standing next to him and whispered something in his ear.

The sailor looked at Chagum briefly, bowed, and slowly extricated himself from the tightly packed lines of Yogoese sailors. When he reached the plank leading down to the dock, he ran down it and didn't look back.

None of the other sailors tried to stop him. No one followed him, either. One of the older sailors kept looking at him as he ran toward the dock until he was taken prisoner once more. The old man was the First Officer of the ship and Tosa's second-in-command.

When the sailor who'd left the ship disappeared from view, the First Officer faced Chagum, bowed, and asked for permission to speak.

When Chagum granted it, he said, "Crown Prince Chagum, I offer sincere thanks for expressing concern for such lowly people as us. The man who just left the ship fell in love with one of the Sangalese women who brought us our food. When you commanded us to follow our hearts, he decided to leave.

"I would not usually permit such a display of disloyalty and immorality, but having sailors distracted by such things aboard ship would be a hindrance to us completing our voyage safely. I must thank you again for saving us, Your Majesty." His voice was choked with emotion.

"I suspect the other sailors here feel as I do. No one else wants to leave the ship, Your Majesty. I do not wish to overstep my place, but will you consider listening to what I have to say?"

Chagum nodded. "Please speak without reserve."

The officer bowed again, then said quietly, "Crown Prince Chagum, I deeply regret leaving Grand Admiral Tosa to die. He was more than our admiral; he taught us all he knew of the sea for many, many years. I consider abandoning him on the flagship to be the most cowardly act of my entire life."

His voice was hoarse with pain and grief. "I wish to atone in some way. I can't do that unless I go home. It may be that we will all be thrown into prison, as Your Majesty said. We may even be sentenced to death. Perhaps you think it would be better for us to remain captives in

a foreign land, Your Majesty, but I believe that all of us sincerely want to return home."

The expressions on the sailors' faces hardened, but no one said anything to contradict the First Officer. The First Officer himself appeared a bit nervous, but then he smiled.

"We may be disgraced, but we are still sailors of New Yogo. If there is a storm waiting for us, we will brave it. No man here is a coward."

The Yogoese sailors on the deck smiled, first at each other, then at the First Officer. When one of the sailors started clapping, the others joined in, filling the air with the sound of prolonged applause.

Chagum felt the sailors' sincere wish to return home like the force of a cresting wave. "I understand exactly how you feel," he said. He took a deep breath and said, "Well, then, men. Let's go home."

All the sailors saluted in unison, then cheered as they took their assigned places and prepared for departure.

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Chagum listened to the ship's white sails flapping in the wind. He felt the ship coursing over the waves with his entire body as he gazed out at the sea. He clenched his fists; now that he'd begun the voyage home, the next steps he was forced to take seemed a lot more difficult.

The image of Talsh warships with their black sails encroaching this far north was burned into his imagination. There were more stone Talsh fortresses north of Rasu; Chagum saw them on many islands between Rasu's archipelago and the Sangal peninsula. It seemed that Sangal had fallen completely to the Talsh. Every fortress Chagum saw seemed like the footprints of the Talsh army marching north.

Chagum's ship for this voyage was small like Senna's, so it didn't need to stop to resupply very often. Prince Raul probably wanted Chagum to hurry home. It would take less than two months for Chagum to arrive back in Kosenyko.

Some of the ships in Chagum's escort did stop at various islands to let off soldiers and workers to assist with the building of other Talsh

fortresses and structures. Chagum saw Sangalese soldiers doing drills beside Talsh ones. They'd probably been preparing for war for all these long months since Chagum had been taken captive. Perhaps Prince Raul wanted to make a spectacle of how thoroughly Sangal had been conquered in such a short time.

The ship escorting Chagum's had clearly been given detailed instructions about where to stop and what to allow Chagum to see. Chagum was glad that he'd managed to meet Prince Raul in person. He had to do a lot less guesswork regarding his motives and intentions thanks to that meeting. He'd only been permitted to go home in exchange for betraying his country.

But there was nothing for Chagum to do now except go home. His grandfather had died before his eyes. He'd been taken captive by the enemy. His safe return with the sailors would certainly look suspicious; he had no doubt that all of these sailors would be imprisoned or punished in some way when the ship arrived at Choron. He wanted to get a letter to Shuga to warn him about Talsh's plans, but even if he could, he still didn't know who the betrayer inside the palace was. Without that knowledge, he had no way to protect his father from assassination.

He felt terrible even thinking it, but he would have a lot more freedom to act after his father was dead. He kept imagining and discarding possible future scenarios in his mind throughout the voyage.

The Mikado's assassination would send the palace into chaos. The Talsh would invade; Sangal would likely assist them. Army General Radou would undoubtedly put forward Tugum as the next Mikado. He might even be inclined to accept Prince Raul's deal without too much convincing. New Yogo would surrender without a fight to avoid the tragedy and destruction of war.

But after that, New Yogo's people would become the vanguard of the army that invaded Kanbal and Rota. They would be embroiled in a war that could last for years. The people of Kanbal and Rota would never forgive New Yogo for what it had done—for what Chagum had done.

Clouds drifted slowly across the blue sky. Chagum narrowed his eyes and looked all the way up: up and up and up. *I can't condemn all those*

people to such a future, he thought.

Prince Raul had pointed to the northern continent on his map and called it his last prize. When Chagum remembered that, he felt the stirrings of a red-hot rage. All of the people living on the northern continent had lives and families and ambitions for themselves. Thinking of them as some kind of prize to be won infuriated Chagum.

I won't let Prince Raul make me into what he wants. It would be too shameful.

Prince Raul viewed Chagum like an insect that he'd caught inside his web. It was only natural that he would think that way; Prince Raul had experience and the might of his huge military behind him to intimidate Chagum, but Chagum refused to be intimidated.

It may be foolish for one person to stand before ten thousand and hope to successfully oppose them, but I'm still going to try.

He understood Prince Raul's plans very well, even if he didn't completely understand his motives. And he'd realized during his conversation with Prince Raul that he might not have to stand up to the Talsh alone. The only way to save New Yogo, Kanbal and Rota was for the three nations to form an alliance against the Talsh.

Accomplishing such a thing would be unbelievably difficult. Even if he begged the King of Kanbal for help, he would probably choose to hide behind the wall of the Misty Blue Mountains. The King of Rota was an honorable man who had always been on good terms with the Mikado; he was also shrewd enough to see the benefit to himself in such an alliance. Chagum believed that he would agree to it, if asked.

But the Mikado would never ask for assistance from New Yogo's neighboring nations. Prince Raul knew that. Hugo and his other spies were entirely familiar with the political situation on the northern continent.

I could contact Rota as New Yogo's regent.

But even as he thought that, Chagum knew that sending messages secretly would be impossible: the Talsh would intercept and read all of his communications. And besides, that would be too slow. The Talsh would have already invaded by the time any message arrived in Rota's

royal palace. With New Yogo's military force crushed or absorbed into the Talsh army, Rota would have no hope of victory.

King Yosam was a very wise ruler, but Chagum saw no way for Rota to successfully resist invasion after Talsh forces landed on the continent. He would probably try to hunker down and fortify his position as quickly as possible rather than rush to New Yogo's aid.

Rota was much larger than New Yogo. Their religion and culture was also vastly different: Rota's people were excellent horsemen and could send huge cavalry forces to war. Chagum believed that this was one of the reasons why the Mikado would never consider asking for an alliance with Rota. He would have to accept that, in some things at least, Rota was superior to New Yogo.

That was probably at least part of the reason that Talsh had targeted New Yogo first. If they attacked Rota first without conquering New Yogo, it was possible that New Yogo would send aid to Rota. Rota was also better-equipped to fend off attacks from the Talsh, even on their own. It made sense to conquer New Yogo first: it was smaller and its resources and people could be used against Rota and Kanbal.

Chagum gritted his teeth. If he wanted to request help from Rota, he'd have to do it before the Talsh invaded. His father would never ask, so the only person who could even attempt to make such a request was Chagum himself. If he sent someone like Jin, the messenger might be refused a hearing because he lacked the full support of the Mikado and the court.

It would also be difficult to reach the King of Rota quickly. The more Chagum thought about it, the more he understood that he was the only suitable diplomat to forge an alliance with Rota before it was too late. Even Chagum's rank as Crown Prince might not be enough to sway the King of Rota, but Chagum had been to the Talsh Empire. He knew what Talsh was planning. He could warn Rota, at the very least.

But how will I get to Rota?

The ship definitely wouldn't stop there. If Chagum ordered the ship to stop in Rota, Prince Raul would probably grasp what Chagum was planning right away. If he tried to sneak away when the ship reached the Sangal peninsula, he would almost certainly be observed by spies

and caught. He had to think of a way to escape that Prince Raul wouldn't expect.

Chagum felt the gentle rocking of the ship around him and listened to the waves. The sea spread out before his eyes to the very limits of his vision. Chagum stared at it for a long time.

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Chagum's ship left Rasu's archipelago at the beginning of summer. The warm winds from the south helped propel the ship through the Tara Ucham, the Dead Sea to the south of Nayoro Peninsula, at a fairly fast pace. It was still too early in the season for rakkaral, the great whirlpools that formed in the sea in the summer. The ship was fortunate in its journey and encountered no storms.

Chagum spent most of his time alone, lost in thought. He permitted no one but Ruin to stay near him and spent long hours writing letters. It was difficult to write clearly due to the motion of the ship, but Chagum was powerfully motivated to write down everything Prince Raul had told him about his plans before he forgot anything important.

He did permit Tagal and Oru to visit him out of gratitude for helping him try to escape, but he didn't meet with Jin. He thanked Jin for help in another letter, then kept recording the Talsh invasion plan. He had no idea what Jin planned to do after returning home. Jin had helped him before, but Chagum was still afraid to trust him.

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There was a knock at the door of Chagum's cabin. He looked up at his scroll and said, "Come in."

Ruin entered and shut the door. When Chagum noticed what he was carrying, he blinked. It was a porcelain bowl full of freshly cut fruit. Although it was hot outside, there were chunks of ice mixed in with the fruit in the bowl.

Ice? How could ice have gotten here? We can't be storing it anywhere on board.

Chagum noticed that the edges of the bowl were slightly wet as Ruin placed it on the table. Ruin smiled and said, "I had the sailors search for an ice cave near the harbor we stopped at this morning. You haven't been eating much, Your Majesty, so the sailors and I wanted to get you something special."

Chagum stared at the fruit and ice in the bowl and didn't say a word. Ruin and the sailors had clearly become friends during their long captivity. And they were all worried about Chagum, who had shut himself up in his cabin for days without seeing anyone aside from Ruin.

He imagined the sailors running through the harbor town, trying to deliver the ice to the ship before it could melt.

"Thank you," Chagum said. His voice was hoarse from disuse, so his words were scarcely audible. He ate some of the fruit and felt refreshing coolness spread through his body. "It's wonderful."

Ruin's smile grew wider.

Ruin was always taking care of him. Chagum felt his solicitousness strongly now in a way he hadn't since the start of this voyage. Ruin had become Chagum's personal servant three years before; they were roughly the same age. Ruin had always treated Chagum like the son of a god. Chagum thought that this might be the first time Ruin had ever looked at him like he was a person and let his feelings show plainly.

He's gotten taller in the past year, hasn't he?

Chagum hadn't noticed any change at all in Ruin until this moment. Chagum could tell from his own clothes that he'd grown quite a bit over the past year or so; it seemed that Ruin had as well.

It could have been his imagination, but he thought Ruin had looked him in the eyes for the briefest of moments after bringing him the fruit. Chagum thought about that as he ate all of the fruit in the bowl. It was delicious.

"Thank you again, Ruin. Please convey my thanks to the sailors as well."

Ruin was smiling when he bowed to Chagum and left the cabin.

***

Ruin came up with excuses to visit Chagum almost every day, even when he wasn't summoned. He brought news from the sailors and Jin. Chagum understood that Ruin was trying to demonstrate that the men on the ship cared about him and were watching over him. Chagum didn't have the heart to order him away, but whenever he looked at Ruin, he saw the faces of all the innocent people of New Yogo. The reminder that Ruin and all of his people would suffer no matter what he did was painful.

After a few days spent in total confinement, Chagum started venturing out to the deck late at night after dinner to stare at the sea. His dinner was prepared before that of the sailors, so he was usually on the deck alone while the others ate their evening meal in their cabins. There was no one else on the deck at this time aside from a skeleton crew.

As Chagum looked out at the ocean as the sun set, he felt a profound sadness. He thought about the palace where he'd been born and raised and the worried faces of his mother and Shuga. The sea view was beautiful, but the last lingering light of the sun reminded him of how fragile his current situation was. Like the light, everything about his current life could vanish at any moment.

Chagum shifted his gaze to the northern sky. Golden clouds spread over the horizon like a mirage in the direction of his home. The wind made the clouds drift and clump together, then dissolve apart. Chagum extended his hands to the sky and traced the movements of the clouds with his fingers.

He heard footsteps approaching behind him, but he didn't turn. "Don't worry," Chagum said. "I'm not going to jump in."

"Uh...I wasn't thinking that at all, Your Majesty," Ruin said.

Chagum turned slowly. His face was pale and slightly chilled from the night air. "You can go back to my cabin," he said. "I'll return shortly."

Ruin looked slightly embarrassed as he said, "Perhaps I will if the waves get stronger, Your Majesty, but my place is by your side."

He looked so grim and serious that Chagum laughed a little. "That's true, but we're not usually at sea, are we? I know you dislike the water and I'm perfectly satisfied with your service. You don't need to force yourself to remain."

Ruin looked at him with an entirely blank expression. After a long pause, he said, "Forgive me for saying so, Your Majesty, but there are times when I find you very confusing."

Chagum didn't understand what Ruin meant by that. He frowned.

Ruin smiled timidly and said, "You're the Crown Prince, but you have always treated me as courteously as if I were a friend. I've been thinking a lot about the palace lately, and..." he trailed off, then looked down. "I was given into service at the palace when I was eight. I originally served your honored brother, His Majesty Crown Prince Sagum. When I entered your service, I was sure you would treat me the same way he did."

Chagum's older brother had died of an illness when Chagum was twelve years old.

That's right—Ruin became my servant after Sagum died.

Sagum had been very like the Mikado in that he had no experience of life outside the palace. "I suppose I must seem quite strange, compared to my brother," Chagum said. He chuckled.

"You know this already, but I've been away from the palace once before this. A strong and kind-hearted bodyguard protected me and took me on an unforgettable journey. I met many people on that journey who treated me with warmth and kindness. I'll never forget them."

When Chagum had first returned to the palace, what he'd wanted more than anything else was a friend. Perhaps that was why he'd treated Ruin as one, despite their gap in status.

"I think I understand what you feel, Your Majesty," Ruin said softly. "When I first started living and working with the sailors in Sangal, everything shocked me. But after a while, I liked it. Having friends. They

were always looking out for me, so I tried to do the same." Ruin smiled brightly. "They even taught me how to swim. Our captors allowed us to go swimming sometimes. The Sangalese sailors were a bit rude—and, um, loud—but they also seemed happy to teach me."

Chagum smiled. "Well, they're Sangalese. The idea of now being free to swim in the sea probably wouldn't occur to them, since they were born and raised on the ocean."

Ruin nodded. "They're a strange people. When I asked them what they would do if we tried to swim away and escape, they laughed at me and said, 'Yogoese people are terrible at swimming.' Even though there are plenty of strong swimmers among the sailors." He shrugged. "If we'd all formed a line and and swam away together, we might have made it."

As Chagum took in Ruin's slightly self-deprecating smile, an idea rose to the surface of his mind.

I could swim.

His eyes widened. He heard his heart beating louder in his ears. He's been thinking for days about circumventing Talsh surveillance, and now he'd finally thought of a way. The path before him, once shrouded in darkness, was now clearly illuminated.

I could probably swim to Rota from here.

If he tricked or distracted the sailors, he might be able to buy enough time to get away. The longer he thought about his potential escape, the more possible it seemed. Obstacles that had seemed impossible to surmount before now seemed manageable.

Escape from the ship was still a reckless plan with a low chance of success. It was also so stupidly reckless that it was likely Prince Raul hadn't even considered it as a possibility. *There's a way—just one. I can get away from the Talsh.*

His entire body felt flush with excitement; he was suddenly far too warm. If he planned well and was lucky, he might be able to avoid interference from his father and the imperial court as well.

The heat in Chagum's blood turned to ice as he considered the difficulty of the plan he was devising.

If I choose to do this...

The person he currently was—Chagum, Crown Prince of New Yogo—would have to disappear. If he failed to gain allies for his nation against the Talsh, he might have to vanish forever. Ruin and the other sailors would certainly be blamed and punished.

Chagum was as still as a statue as he considered his plan. Looking at his expression made Ruin uneasy.

"Your Majesty?" Ruin asked. His face was bathed in the soft light of the early evening sky.

Chagum didn’t say anything for a long while. When he broke free of his thoughts, he said, "Ruin, please listen..."

Chapter 2 -

The Blue Road in the Moonlight

The setting sun turned every cloud in the sky a bright golden color. Chagum stood alone on the ship's deck and stared at the clouds. There was an island to the left of the ship just a little farther ahead. He saw the cooking fires of fishermen on the island's shore.

There was another island to the north of the nearest one; the ship would be stopping there the next morning to take on fresh water and resupply. That harbor would be the last stop before Choron harbor in New Yogo. Chagum would have to cross the remainder of the Tara Ucham, the Dead Sea, as his ancestor Torugal had done before him. Beyond the Tara Ucham was the Nayoro Peninsula. Chagum was almost home.

Night fell quickly, but a sliver of bright gold light lingered on the horizon. The fires of the fishermen on the island flickered in the dark. Chagum leaned over the side of the ship and gazed at the fires until they passed out of sight.

Tonight was his last chance to escape. If he waited, that island would be too far away for him to reach.

The stars twinkled as they emerged. The clouds from earlier in the day had dissipated, leaving the sky bright and clear. The moon was exceptionally bright. When the bell signaling dinner on the ship rang out, sailors milled about on the deck and called out to one another in cheerful voices.

Chagum took one last look at the island, then stood up straight and walked briskly to his cabin belowdecks. He dressed himself while the sailors were eating dinner. Ruin had brought him an ordinary sailor's uniform in secret along with a short sword. He buckled the sword's belt around his waist and made sure the sword was securely sheathed.

When he stood up, the sword felt heavy. He frowned; it definitely hadn't felt so heavy before, at his adulthood ceremony. But he had no choice but to bring it with him, along with all the gold and gems he'd received from Princess Karina as a parting gift when he'd stopped in Sangal. At the time he'd considered the gift a token of apology and had never thought to spend them, but now he saw how they might be used to make the long journey ahead easier.

Chagum took a large stack of papers that he'd recorded the Talsh invasion plan on and passed them to Ruin. Ruin bowed and stowed the papers away in his breast pocket. He was very pale; his expression was serious and intense.

"Well, then," Ruin said, "I'm leaving, Your Majesty."

Chagum nodded. "Thank you for your help."

Ruin paused in Chagum's doorway and turned around. In a voice that shook, he said, "I pray for Ten no Kami, the God of the Heavens, to protect you, Crown Prince Chagum. May you find a way to save us, so that you can return to us someday." He bowed his head deeply as if in reverence to a god, then left the cabin.

Chagum stood still and stared at the door of his cabin for a short while. Ruin believed in Chagum, even though his chances of success were something like one in ten thousand. Chagum had saved New Yogo from drought before; perhaps Ruin was expecting another miracle.

Chagum walked out of his cabin with his heart beating like the rhythmic tolling of bells. He felt like he was walking on air as he ascended to the deck. There were some scattered sailors on duty, but it was getting dark and Chagum was dressed as an ordinary sailor, so no one gave him a second glance.

He went to the prow of the ship and looked out at the deep blue sea. The sky was perfectly clear; the moon was bright and reflected perfectly on the water's surface. The island to his left was visible in dim outlines.

Chagum removed his shirt, then wrapped and tied the sleeves around his waist. His hakama were only half-length and very light to

wear. His grandfather had taught him to swim unimpeded by his clothing—though those lessons had happened a long time ago.

The evening breeze ruffled the hair at the back of his neck. As he gazed out at the ocean, he felt powerless and small. He still wasn't sure if this was a good idea or not.

Please tell me I'm not being an idiot here, somebody. I really hope I'm not.

He shook all over, as if he was being pricked by hundreds of cold, sharp needles.

Do I really have to jump and swim all the way to Rota—alone?

Chagum closed his eyes and took deep breaths of the sea air to compose himself. The wind was warm; he suddenly felt a bit feverish, like his body was being warmed from within. His eyes were still closed, but he thought he saw a flash of light from beneath them.

When he opened his eyes, he perceived the light clearly: it was a long trail of migrating water dwellers above him in the night sky. He prayed that what awaited him at the end of this journey would be the smiles of the people he cared for, and not their sadness and grief. Even if he never saw them again, he wanted to give his friends and his people a brighter future.

That's why I have to jump.

The moon was beginning to set. Its light warped and lengthened on the ocean's surface, creating an unsteady path of light.

A blue road. A path over the sea.

Someone called out loudly behind him: "Fire! The waste area is on fire!"

Sailors shouted and rushed to the rear of the ship. Ruin had tossed oily rags and cholu into the waste area and lit them on fire for a distraction. The burning herb made the air smell slightly sweet. The waste area was quite small and self-contained, so the sailors should be able to put out the fire fairly easily.

The commotion would probably draw the attention of their Sangalese escort. Before the Sangalese ship could approach, Chagum

climbed over the edge of the ship. He took a deep breath, assumed the correct diving pose, and kicked off the edge of the ship.

Off I go.

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After planting the oily rags and cholu in the waste area, Ruin dashed belowdecks to find Chagum's guard, Jin. When Jin saw Ruin's face, he knew that something must have happened.

"What's wrong?" Jin asked.

"Crown Prince Chagum told me to deliver a letter," Ruin said. "He wants you to read it immediately."

Jin accepted two sealed letters, one addressed to him, the other to Shuga. He passed over Shuga's letter, opened his and read it with a frown of deep concentration.

Crown Prince Chagum began his letter by expressing his thanks. Then he explained everything that had happened to him since they'd been separated in considerable detail. Jin took in this information with great interest. His eyes devoured the contents of the letter impatiently as he tried to discover the reason for its urgent delivery.

Jin had read all the way to the point where Crown Prince Chagum had met Second Prince Raul of the Talsh empire when he heard a commotion coming from the deck above.

Jin's eyes widened; he was about to set aside the letter to investigate when Ruin said, "His Majesty wants you to read that letter all the way to the end." His tone was severe. "You are ordered not to leave this spot until you've read it all."

Jin frowned at Ruin. The boy stood in the doorway, preventing him from leaving. Jin could easily push him aside, but he couldn't defy a direct order from the Crown Prince. He went back to reading the letter.

As he neared the end of the scroll, Jin broke into a cold sweat. The commotion on the deck started to quiet down. Jin knew that Crown Prince Chagum probably wasn't on the ship any longer.

Jin turned toward Ruin. "What is the meaning of this? Why didn't you stop him?"

Ruin flinched, but he looked Jin in the eyes as he answered, "I believe in His Majesty Crown Prince Chagum. He's going to save us all."

Jin saw the strong light of conviction in Ruin's eyes. They were just like Crown Prince Chagum's.

Save us all? That's nothing but a child's dream.

Jin suddenly felt almost inexpressibly sad. He passed by Ruin, who was no longer blocking the door, and left his cabin to check on the situation on the deck. Crown Prince Chagum's words echoed in his mind as he walked.

I've decided to die.

That's what he had written.

As long as I take nothing with me, it will seem to Prince Raul that I am dead. It must be convincing, or Prince Raul and his spies will see right through it. If he believes I am dead, I may be able to escape his notice.

Crown Prince Chagum had thrown away everything for the slim chance of outmaneuvering his unimaginably powerful enemy.

Tell the Mikado that you have killed me by pushing me into the ocean. I'm sure he'll reward you when he hears the news. I hope the sailors don't give you too much trouble when I disappear. Ruin may be able to help you smooth things over.

Please deliver my letter to Shuga as soon as possible.

Jin understood that Crown Prince Chagum sincerely believed in what he was doing. His letter was the product of weeks or months of careful thinking and planning.

He saw all of Crown Prince Chagum's doubts and concerns buried in the details of his long letter. He clearly hadn't wanted to cause problems for Jin, Ruin, or the other sailors on board, but some harm was unavoidable: his plan was too reckless.

Reckless and impossible. Crown Prince Chagum's chances of success were one in a million.

A child's dream…and Crown Prince Chagum is chasing it.

When he reached the deck, the air still smelled like smoke. The sailors reassured Jin that the fire had been put out.

"Some idiot put cholu in the waste area," a sailor said. "We discovered the fire immediately and put it out, so there's no damage to the ship."

Jin nodded, then faced the ship's prow. His thoughts were so oppressive that he couldn't breathe. In the far distance, he thought he saw something small and white in the ocean: a person swimming.

The swimmer was fast and determined, but still within easy range of recovery. If Jin called out now, the ship could certainly catch up to Crown Prince Chagum, but Jin didn't move. All he did was stare.

Unlike Ruin, Jin didn't believe that Crown Prince Chagum would succeed in his plans. He hoped it, but he didn't believe it. Still, this was Chagum's chance to escape both the Mikado's grip and the plotting of his enemies. He wouldn't be forced to play a role in his father's death—and it was better for him to chase his dream, no matter how impossible it seemed, than it would be for him to die a slower death by Talsh oppression.

Jin stared at Chagum as he receded into the distance and remembered his face as he'd wept and told Balsa just how much he didn't want to be the Crown Prince. He'd been so young then. Jin understood how awful it must have been for him to be shut up in that cold, dark palace while his father shunned him. His future life would have been more of the same if he'd stayed. Jin considered the Mikado's long-standing feud with Chagum even more unfortunate than he usually did, since the threat of war with Talsh was looming on the horizon. The country needed to be united now.

Jin had spent a long time in captivity. He'd gradually earned the trust of the Sangalese guards and his jailors; consequently, he knew quite a bit about how Sangal had come to be subjugated by the Talsh empire. New Yogo was on the verge of ruin: that was entirely obvious to Jin. If Talsh military forces attacked, all of New Yogo's defenders would be wiped out. Unless the Mikado or the Holy Sage worked some kind of miracle, Jin didn't know how the nation could avoid the coming disaster.

Jin smiled bitterly to himself. He should believe that the Mikado was capable of miracles, but he didn't. He saw no outcome for his homeland but the destructive flames of war.

Wherever Crown Prince Chagum is going, it's probably safer than New Yogo.

He wanted Chagum to survive. He'd had so much put on him from such a young age. As Jin watched him swim away from the ship, he felt proud. He would slap Chagum's back in encouragement if he were still here.

Jin closed his eyes. If Chagum intended to go to Rota, the distance was considerable. It would be difficult for him to live and travel on his

own. Finding the King of Rota and forging an alliance was so inconceivable that Jin despaired of it ever happening.

But even so...

If there were miracles in this world, they weren't caused by any gods or rulers. They were caused by people like Chagum, who had made the decision to risk his life to save everything.

Ten no Kami, watch over your brave descendant.

Jin opened his eyes and looked out at the sea. Chagum was no longer visible. Jin's face set into solemn lines. He had prayed to Ten no Kami: the rest was up to Crown Prince Chagum. His odds of success were staggeringly low, but Jin knew that wouldn't stop him from trying. Jin looked out at the sea once more, then finally turned his back on it.

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Chagum swam across the ocean alone. He'd already realized that his swimming practice with Senna and the sailors would only take him so far here. The water was dark and felt cold and heavy as it splashed over his shoulders. If a large wave overtook him out here, he was at risk of sinking to the ocean floor.

The island in front of him loomed large in his field of vision, but it didn't seem to be getting any closer. Anxiety turned to fear as the muscles of his stomach clenched. His arms felt as heavy as lead. He swallowed seawater and started coughing violently; he stopped swimming, sank under the waves and swallowed even more water.

The island still wasn't getting any closer.

Chagum floundered and couldn't get his bearings. There was nothing under his feet but darkness. Fear numbed his muscles and his mind. Before he could calm himself, he felt himself sinking like a stone. He understood what was happening, but he couldn't move.

There was water in his ears; he heard its low rumble as he neared the ocean floor. He couldn't see anything and couldn't breathe.

Suddenly, right before his eyes, a sheet of tiny, faintly shining bubbles appeared, accompanied by the sound of a familiar voice:

Swimming in that lake and swimming in the ocean are entirely different. If you ever do fall in, focus on floating. If you flounder around too much, you'll sink.

His grandfather, Tosa, had told him that.

Other voices, innumerable voices, joined his grandfather's in a sort of song. He thought that maybe he'd heard it before.

Chagum tried to make himself lighter by letting go of the tension in his limbs. Struggling too hard against the water was what was making him sink. He remembered how Senna had floated on the ocean's surface with her limbs and hair fanning out wide in all directions.

Chagum let himself go limp and worked on calming his fear. He felt himself rise up slowly in through the water until his face broke the surface. The air tasted sweet; he took in deep gulping breaths and felt relief spread to his whole body. Remembering Senna's advice and posture while swimming had helped him remember how to float.

Maybe her blessing really is protecting me.

The thought made Chagum want to smile. He could rest and float for a while, then keep swimming when he felt a little stronger. There was no one to save him here if he drowned.

But even swimming alone in the darkness, Chagum didn't feel alone. The sound of the innumerable singing voices was still with him as he kept swimming toward the island.

Suddenly, the sky above him grew bright with stars—only they weren't stars. They were spirits floating in the warm, bright blue water of Nayugu. Here and there, scattered in the water, Chagum saw vividly colored flowers floating, illuminated by the spirits migrating from the south to the north. Schools of golden fish darted in and out of the line of spirits and gathered around the flowers.

Countless Yona Ro Gai danced and swam in the bright blue waves, leaving orange-tinged bubbles in their wake. Chagum felt that their swimming was like an invitation to dance; the sea and the sky seemed perfectly blended together into a single realm, as if there was no separation between Nayugu and Sagu at all.

As the sound of the singing voices faded, Chagum heard the Yona Ro Gai speaking to him.

"It's spring," one of the Yona Ro Gai whispered in his ear. "Keep swimming."

Chagum saw and felt the dark, cold sea of Sagu and the warm, bright blue ocean of Nayugu simultaneously. When he left the water, he'd be in Sagu again: the world of blood and fire and human beings. He would have to live and travel in that world, probably for a long time.

"Keep swimming."

He could do that. He was strong enough.

Chagum spread out his arms and faced the sky, gazing up at the river of light formed by countless spirits as bright as stars. There was a light coming from Chagum as well. Maybe the other spirits could see it: one light among countless others in the vastness of the world.

Chagum smiled and waved at the spirits above him. Then he took a deep breath and swam slowly but steadily in the in-between space of Nayugu and Sagu's oceans.

He was almost to the island now. He could see moonlight shining on the beach.

This is the end of *Traveler of the Blue Road*. The story continues in *Guardian of Heaven and Earth - Rota.*

Afterword

When I first started writing the *Guardian of the Spirit* series, I was struck by how differently Balsa and Chagum see their world. Balsa is a habitual wanderer with no fixed home and an individualistic personality, but Chagum is a prince. Even if he has his own ideas and desires, he has to put his country first.

Chagum and Balsa's adventures have diverged a great deal in terms of setting and theme. Even when Balsa's traveling, her role is to protect others and herself; that's why her books are the *Guardian* books. But Chagum travels for many reasons and gets entangled in all sorts of complex plots and struggles, all while he's still struggling to find his own purpose. That's why his books are the *Traveler* books.

In *Traveler of the Blue Road*, Chagum chooses to begin his next journey on his own terms, and alone. His journey doesn't end here, of course. Please wait patiently for the next book in the series.

I want to thank my wonderful (and insanely busy) illustrator, Satake Miho, for illustrating such a long story, and my editors for always being so considerate of my work.

Uehashi Nahoko

Author's Notes on Traveler of the Blue Road

Jumping in and Seeing the Light

People reading this book for the first time might think, "Huh? That's it?" when they reach the end, but I've always been pleased with how this story ends. Writing the last scene was like seeing the light at the end of a very, very long tunnel.

I found this book incredibly difficult to write, but tremendously satisfying to finish. When I had written scarcely eighty pages, a thesis came due, so I was forced to pause working on the novel for a long time.

But even when I got time to work on it again, I was completely stuck! My mind was as white and blank as the sand on a beach.

I kept trying over and over again to write it, but a voice in the back of my head kept insisting, "That's not right." I got increasingly frustrated, but I kept working at it.

I thought I would have to keep working endlessly until, finally, I saw it: Chagum diving into the dark waves of the sea from the deck of a ship.

As soon as I saw that, it was like the way was made clear. I needed to write the story that led to Chagum making such a choice. Writing the book suddenly became so much easier: all the pieces suddenly seemed to fit together perfectly.

This was the exhaustive process that gave rise to *Traveler of the Blue Road*. I've been writing for almost twenty years, so I've had similar experiences before. I often scrap the first scenes I write for a new story in favor of something new.

However, I've never had a story be so adamant about what *wasn't* right with it before this book. All those failed ideas weren't part of the story I wanted to tell. I wasn't comfortable sending this story out into the world until it felt completely right to me.

The series will continue in *Guardian of Heaven and Earth*, which is in three volumes. I hope you will continue to follow Balsa and Chagum on their adventures.

Uehashi Nahoko
April 4, 2008

Abiko

Commentary on Traveler of the Blue Road

Most authors hate the question, "Where do you get your ideas?"

In my case, stories are never born of just a single idea, or even a set of them. There are several complex factors that feed into a story's genesis. Explaining all of them is difficult; I don't think it's possible to describe everything in words.

A few days ago, I read an interview in a magazine with Uehashi Nahoko where she described her inspiration for the G*uardian of the Spirit* series. I found myself wondering more about where, exactly, the series had come from.

The series itself is so interesting—so vast in scope, so detailed, so rich and varied; I was certain that the story behind its genesis would be fascinating. The stories of each book build on one another, one after the other as if inspired by the same thought. It's an accessible, no-nonsense and engaging fantasy adventure. There are certainly other book series like it, but I find the scope and the style unique, and once again found myself curious about the series' seed.

It became all I could think about while reading. How was this story born? Nourished? Developed? How were these books accomplished? Perhaps these questions seem overly simplistic, but I've never written a grand fantasy epic before. I was mightily interested in how this one had been put together.

When I posed these questions to Professor Uehashi, she gave me an answer (though I'm sure she's gotten the same questions a hundred times before). Her idea of Balsa and Chagum came from a movie trailer that featured a woman holding a boy's hand as they got off a bus together. That scene excited her for reasons she couldn't entirely explain.

I thought it was marvelous and mysterious that a story could be born from something so simple. Fiction isn't bound by ordinary rules or conventions; there's incredible freedom and creativity in it. I'm still amazed how authors like Professor Uehashi manage to create full worlds that seem real using only letters on a page. And yet it happens—

obviously. Writing is so much fun. I suddenly wanted to write something myself; just imagining what I might write was exciting.

During my discussion with Professor Uehashi, I also made a somewhat reluctant confession. I may be in the minority of fans, but I prefer the *Traveler* books to the *Guardian* books in the series. Of course I love Balsa, but I love Chagum more. Professor Uehashi gave me a knowing smile and said, "Maybe you just like outcasts, Ms. Satou."

Exactly right! Out of the entire series, *Traveler of the Blue Road* is my favorite. I love that its main setting is the sea and that the adventure is as much mystery and psychology as it is travel and politics. I think Hugo is the coolest character ever...aside from Chagum, whose character journey in this novel I find to be the most compelling. He goes from being a weak and spoiled boy to a tough, tenacious and self-actualized young man. Such a struggle isn't easy, of course, but I find it beautiful.

Chagum grows up throughout the series, of course. He's always in trouble and always maturing and finding ways to solve problems and escaping danger by the skin of his teeth (often with a little help)—but my strongest impression of the character comes from *Traveler of the Blue Road*.

Chagum being protected by Balsa, Balsa witnessing Chagum's growth, Chagum growing up and transforming his cursed past into something new: Balsa and Chagum are the protector and the protected, and they each give each other something in this series. Perhaps what they give each other is simply love. Whatever it is, I find it foundational to the series.

Even when Balsa's not in the story, her influence on Chagum's life is acutely felt. When Chagum travels, decides, and fights alone, Balsa's power is always there, just a little, under the surface—to give him courage.

I think the best part of the book is the final scene. Spoiler warning: in a series full of unforgettable scenes, the very end of *Traveler of the Blue Road* is my favorite. It's engraved on my heart forever. It's so easy to imagine: one difficult choice, one brave act, and one beautiful scene. I love the ending, but I understand why many fans find it unsatisfying. The first edition of this book didn't have this essay or author's notes in

it; it simply ended, leaving fans waiting on a cliffhanger for over a year before they could read the rest. I feel like chuckling a little—secretly—whenever I see people reading it. The end is definitely something of a surprise.

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Balsa and Chagum are both protagonists in this series. I wondered if Professor Uehashi planned out all ten books from the beginning, but it seems that she's been discovering the story along with the characters, one step (and one book) at a time. The created world has parallels to history, to the point where it's a bit like watching a period drama play out, but with many and significant differences. The individual characters live in a world with history, politics, and complex interpersonal relationships, plus fantasy elements. The story depends on both Balsa and Chagum, but Chagum becomes the driver of the plot.

Perhaps this analysis seems pointless or like nonsense, but I definitely see a strong influence from the historical fiction genre. History is full of turbulent periods followed by long (or short) lulls, but a novel has to place the focus on individual characters. This is not the story of New Yogo's history: it's Chagum's personal story. His thoughts and actions are all recorded vividly. I think his appeal as a character comes from three things. First, his nobility of character, which does not simply come from him being a prince (though that certainly contributes). Second, Chagum's deep connection to Nayugu and the world of magic weaving. And third, the flexibility of mind and action that he both learned and developed during his time with Balsa. Without any of these things, Chagum would not be Chagum; I believe he would also feel significantly less real.

The transformation in his character in *Traveler of the Blue Road* is completely obvious; he goes from hiding his face behind a cloth to cleaning the deck of a ship with dirty rags. Seeing this change from a perplexed Hugo's perspective is one of my favorite parts. Hugo manages to keep Chagum from sending his soul into Nayugu and even convinces Chagum to see things from his own perspective. They both understand

that Chagum is responsible for the fate of his nation and the lives of all his people. But Chagum hates being a prince and living separated from others in a cold palace; the road he walks must balance his responsibilities with how he actually wants to live.

I've written mostly about Chagum here, but I find characters like Hugo, Senna and the Sangalese pirates equally fascinating.

Professor Uehashi and are the same age and published our first novels at the same time. We're incredibly different as authors, but when I sat down to talk with her I realized that we're a lot more alike than we are different.

This series mixes genres and styles; it's a children's book and a fantasy with some historical basis all mixed up to create this vividly detailed world. I look forward to writing more myself, and to walking down the path of literature with Professor Uehashi, side-by-side if not hand-in-hand.

Takako Satou